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Tangos Before Sunrise, Sunset and Midnight: A Conversational Journey with Jesse and Celine

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Tangos Before Sunrise, Sunset and Midnight:
A Conversational Journey with Jesse and Celine

by Randy Rasmussen

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Preface

Like the one between Celine and Jesse in *Before Sunrise*, some chance encounters are more fortunate than others. I didn't see *Before Sunrise* when it came to theaters in 1994—didn't even hear about it. Several years later, while channel surfing during a commercial break from a TV show I've long forgotten, I stumbled upon Richard Linklater's unusual romantic drama. As I joined them, Jesse and Celine were wandering through an amusement park in Vienna, gabbing about the practicality of romantic relationships and largely ignoring their surroundings. Intrigued, I never returned to the program I had been watching. Instead I joined Linklater's young couple on a conversational journey through the streets and alleys of modern day Vienna, discussing a wide variety of topics and getting to know one another.

They agreed, they argued, they flirted with and tried to manipulate each other. They reacted to the sights and people they encountered, sometimes with conspiratorial glee and sometimes contrarily. They shared their private pasts, distant and recent. They occasionally grew bored with each other. They sought, avoided and again sought a romantic entanglement. They referred back to their own conversations, barely hours old. They made plans and promises, then went their separate ways, leaving the audience to decide their future. They did all of these things, and more, without being interrupted and distracted by the usual plot intrigues of romantic dramas and

comedies. Such intrigues make other movies exciting and memorable. Who can think of *Casablanca's* “fight for love and glory” without war-weary refugees and the battle for freedom against Nazi oppression, or *North by Northwest* without spies, duplicity and death-defying escapes? *Before Sunrise* never indulges in melodramatic diversions. We either engage emotionally with Celine and Jesse and their conversational marathon or we change the channel, DVD, Blu-ray or whatever format we're watching.

The day after catching the second half of *Before Sunrise* on television, I purchased a VHS tape of the movie at a local video store and watched the entire film that night. I was hooked. Repeated encounters gave me a greater appreciation for the surprising twists and turns within the extended dialogs of Celine and Jesse. *Before Sunrise* became one of my favorite films. When a sequel, *Before Sunset*, arrived nearly a decade later, I was skeptical. Would the fictional illusion of a complicated intimacy fall apart from over-familiarity? No. Linklater, his co-writers and lead performers took into account nine years of separation between the two main characters and created a very different journey for them *back* to intimacy.

Before Midnight did the same, throwing Jesse and Celine into an emotional cauldron of romantic, parental and career pressures accumulated over many years and finally erupting in a memorable battle of words worthy of George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But as different as the *Before* movies are from each other, they form the unbreakable web of a romantic relationship from its youthful beginning to mid-life crisis, evoking an acute awareness of the passage of time and its challenges to sustaining passion.

This book is a reflection of my fascination with the fictional odyssey of Jesse and Celine. It attempts to trace their conversational journey through a kaleidoscope of experience and

recollection, affection and resentment, passion and disillusionment. Theirs is an intriguing tango that's lasted for nearly twenty years and may not yet be finished, if its creators return to the same dance floor at some future time.

Introduction: The Space Between

Romance in Richard Linklater's film trilogy, *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*, is an exercise in perpetual motion, with endless variations. A complicated series of dance steps touching on so many emotional nuances and never repeated in precisely the same way. There's physical attraction at first sight, awkward maneuvers to initiate an acquaintance, the exhilarating yet risky exploration of each other's private histories and opinions, competition to see whose history and opinions will define their future relations, inevitable misunderstandings, the invention of games to forge a solidarity or to express indirectly what cannot be stated openly, inevitable periods of boredom with each other, slips of the tongue resulting from a variety of causes, coincidental moments of good or bad luck that can either rescue or damage a relationship, and so much more.

If the three *Before* movies were re-edited down to the length of a music video and set to music, the highlights of Celine and Jesse's romance might best be scored by a tango: something like Astor Piazzolla's "Lo Que Vendra," or perhaps Haris Alexiou's "Gia Ena Tango" from *Before Midnight*. One of the exciting things about these three films is that so much of what is often edited out of movie romances is left *in*. And because they contain very few extraneous plot developments to intrude on Celine and Jesse's intimate tango of love and hate, we can get very

close to the fictional illusion they create. There are no death threats, car chases, abductions, spy intrigues or natural disasters to obstruct our view of or re-shape their private interactions.

Before Sunrise is the story of a one-night acquaintance and romance, yet it contains glimpses of many things explored in the two sequels. It sets the stage for what comes later, despite the fact that according to the writers, actors and director involved no sequels were planned while it was being made. Elements of attraction and conflict introduced in the first film recur throughout the next two, though seldom in identical form. Listen to dialog between the two main characters in *Sunset* and *Midnight* and you'll hear echoes of scenes and situations in *Sunrise*. The richness and subtlety of the 1994 original made the sequels worth filming--and they do not disappoint. Instead of merely trying to recapture the romantic freshness of *Sunrise*, *Sunset* builds itself on the bittersweet *memory* of events in Vienna, combined with tensions and experiences acquired by Celine and Jesse during the intervening nine years. *Midnight* takes the hopeful conclusion of *Sunset* and ruthlessly subjects it to nine years of the wear and tear of a long-term relationship, including divorce and children and careers, while retaining a nostalgic whiff of the excitement and passion of Vienna.

The conversations between Celine and Jesse progress within each film and from film to film. For example, they are understandably tentative and cautious at the beginning of their acquaintance, on board a train headed for Vienna. Conversing at length in the lounge car, they grow more confident, less self-conscious, more revealing and daring. Yet when Jesse persuades Celine to get off the train and explore Vienna with him, they find themselves suddenly tongue-tied again, too aware that their bold action has taken their brief acquaintance to a higher level of intimacy. That same shy hesitation returns later, in the listening booth of a record shop and on a

Ferris wheel, when they confront the prospects of romantic feelings and their first kiss, despite their comfortably easy banter between those moments of decision.

Before Sunset begins similarly to *Before Sunrise*. Despite the intimacy they forged by the end of the first movie, Jesse and Celine must begin again as near-strangers, awkwardly renewing their acquaintance after a long separation. And this time they are burdened by a load of emotional baggage (old memories of each other, an unexplained broken promise, intervening relationships with other people, careers, children, etc.) they did not carry on board that train to Vienna. Their movement towards renewed intimacy is complicated, sometimes sabotaged, by accumulated disappointment, frustration and resentment. Their pasts push them apart as much as it draws them together. In *Before Sunrise* it's only their past relationships with *other* people, rather than with each other, that helps shape their responses to each other, at least until they begin to create a shared past through successive conversations.

Before Midnight is a whole new ball game for Jesse and Celine. The tentativeness between them is mostly gone. Nine years of being a couple and raising children has stripped away most of the polite formalities from their conversations and interactions. And they no longer occupy a conversational bubble, blissfully removed from the prying eyes and ears, the demands and meddling, of other people. On the contrary, during a dinner conversation while on vacation in Greece, they are more than willing to air out their dirty laundry in front of new acquaintances, even using those new friends to embarrass and hurt each other. But in the end it comes down to another private, marathon gab-session between the two lead characters to expose and hopefully work through mutual grievances that obviously festered for too many years when talk was cheap and communication rare. Only at the end of the movie, liberated from their claustrophobic hotel

room and the witch's brew of ungoverned frustrations and grievances they conjure there, do Jesse and Celine resemble again the couple they became in Vienna.

The intimate conversations Celine and Jesse share over the course of eighteen years and three movies continuously reference their shared past, sometimes consciously and sometimes not. Even within *Before Sunrise*, both characters employ snippets of dialog from their previous conversations, to poke fun at, express mutual affection for and insult each other. For example, while walking through an amusement park debating the validity of romance, Celine refers to something Jesse said in the Ferris wheel a short time earlier in order to undercut his cynical remark about people's false romantic projections. In a later scene, by contrast, she refers back to a much earlier conversation in which Jesse recalled a vision he once had of his dead grandmother. That story, Celine reveals, triggered her affection for Jesse long before she was willing to openly acknowledge it. And Jesse is clearly touched by what she says. In a more hostile vein, during their encounter with an itinerant Viennese poet, Jesse revives the phrase "rooster prick" to retaliate against Celine for previously using the same words to describe his bad behavior in an even earlier scene.

Add nine years of history between *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*, and another nine years of shared life between *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*, and you have a rich source of material for the couple to selectively recall, manipulate, distort or forget as they continuously re-define their present by their past. No conversation precisely repeats a predecessor. Elements are dropped, rearranged and added. Emphasis shifts. But over the course of many years and many conversations, we get better acquainted with Jesse and Celine. Repeated behaviors, patterns of avoidance and methods of distancing themselves from emotions that make them vulnerable

become more evident to us. So too are the methods by which they try to repair their time-battered love. Familiarity may breed contempt, but it can also breed a depth of understanding.

Any *one* admirer's interpretation of a great film, or three great films, is necessarily limited by his or her perspective at the time he or she offers it. But as I try to delineate the wandering, unsettled, exhilarating course of a conversational journey between two of silver screen's most memorable lovers, I hope you'll be motivated to come up with your own interpretation. After all, not even Jesse and Celine see things the same way all the time. Over the course of eighteen years they frequently contradict themselves. Yet they never quite give up on the idea of bridging the space that separates them from each other.

Before Sunrise: Finding a Rhythm

Richard Linklater's 1994 film *Before Sunrise* deftly yet passionately explores the ordinary barriers between two strangers, *any* two strangers, and the efforts they make, if it seems worthwhile, to bridge those barriers. With a minimum of plot twists and melodramatic incidents to get in the way, the movie is free to concentrate in great detail on the ebb and flow of relations between a young man and a young woman who meet on a train far from either's home. The less than twenty-four hour romantic journey of Celine and Jesse is both a marathon and a maze, full of twists and turns, dead ends and unexpected openings, discoveries and deceptions, none of which are driven by situations more unusual than their coincidental close encounter on a train

Much of their brief acquaintance takes place in Vienna, Austria, admittedly an exotic element for some of us in this otherwise deceptively mundane story. But this is not the Vienna of *The Third Man* (1949), filled with international tensions, black market intrigues and danger to life and limb. This is Vienna circa 1994, full of historical landmarks and contemporary nooks and crannies providing ample opportunities for intimate conversation. These picturesque settings come to life not for their own sake but only in relation to what happens between the two main characters who wander through them.

Slow, stately music from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* plays over the opening credits of

Before Sunrise. Like many pre-existing pieces of music layered onto rather than composed specifically for a film, it encourages an audience to reflect in broad terms on what they see and hear. I'm reminded of a similar use of another Purcell composition during the opening credits and first scene of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, albeit to a very different effect. The pace of the music in *Before Sunrise* quickens with the first shot of the first scene--an overhead view of railroad tracks passing by rapidly beneath us. A second set of tracks merges with the first, generating a visual metaphor for the chance meeting about to occur between two people riding the train from which the shot is taken.

We're somewhere in rural Central Europe on a beautiful, cloudless summer day. From a train window we watch picturesque farms and villages pass by. Interestingly, objects closer to us appear and disappear more quickly, and with less definition, than more distant objects. Think of the hundreds of strangers we typically pass by every day. In subsequent shots we cross over two rivers, each with boat traffic illustrating the everyday routines of other people we will never meet. Geographical features blend and blur together through repetition and brevity of exposure. The fragile, fleeting nature of most encounters, even those involving only inanimate objects, is the overall impression I get from these opening images. Purcell's music emphasizes the relentless, almost mechanical passage of various objects in and out of our lives.

Background music is displaced by the more immediate sound of train wheels rolling over tracks. A woman enters one of the train's corridors and walks toward us, ignoring the passing scenery still visible through the windows at right. The world outside is, for the moment, of no interest to her. She glances into several passenger compartments before entering one. I'm guessing she chose an unoccupied compartment, wishing to avoid the company of strangers.

Most of us can empathize with her impulse, which subtly illustrates two of the most common barriers to human intimacy: our desire for privacy and our discomfort around strangers.

The woman who sets the stage for what happens next disappears from view, never to be seen again. Who is she? Where is she going? What is her life like at this moment? We'll never know. Nor will she ever know anything about us. Her mildly defensive effort to secure privacy contrasts with the comparative courage of our hero and heroine in the next scene. Our random encounter with her prefigures the randomness of the first encounter between the film's main characters. Of course this is a scripted, rehearsed, performed and photographed *movie*. It contains no chance encounters. But the fictional *illusion* of them is vital to our understanding and appreciation of what happens next.

Cut to a different car in the same train, with no private compartments. These are cheap seats, where privacy is more difficult to come by. A middle aged couple seated together is the next stop on our journey into intimacy. The husband reads a newspaper. The wife complains about it. He resents her intrusion. She looks away from him and folds her arms in protest. Is this a passing episode in an otherwise happy marriage or one in a long series of disagreements? None of us, including the filmmakers, realize this is a sobering preview of an argument that will occur eighteen years later, in *Before Midnight*, between two other characters in this train car who haven't met yet.

The middle aged couple bickers in German. Linklater supplies no subtitles for those of us who don't understand that language (I cheated, using the published film script). And maybe that's part of the point of this scene. People can be divided from one another by a host of barriers, including language differences.

Surveying the rest of the car's occupants, we see a young woman seated across the aisle from the arguing couple. Trying to read a book, she is slightly distracted by their disturbance. This is Celine, whose name we won't discover for some time to come.

Further away from the bickering couple, judging from the diminished volume of their voices, sits a young man asleep, oblivious to everyone and everything around him, including the exterior scenery visible through the window next to him. In retrospect we might wonder if he barely missed out on a chance encounter with Celine, and the unusual adventure she will experience with someone else in this car.

Elsewhere another pair sit side by side, also more removed from the disturbance than is Celine. They're an elderly, white-haired couple. The man gazes, with little sign of interest, at the scenery outside his window. His wife reads a newspaper. A reverse of the middle aged couple. Are they more content with their lives together than are their younger counterparts? Able to engage in separate activities without resenting the lack of attention paid to each other? Or do they simply not give a damn anymore, remaining together out of convenience or habit? We don't know. And because our encounter with them is momentary, we never will. By juxtaposing a variety of anonymous characters in this scene, Linklater makes us keenly aware of strangers existing in close proximity for a short time, with little or no connection to or understanding of each other, then presumably going their separate ways, like different sets of railroad tracks that briefly conjoin and then separate.

A young man sits with a book on his lap, dividing *his* time between reading and gazing out the window at the wider world. Is he distracted by other matters, unable to focus completely on either activity? His legs and feet occupy the adjacent seat. Maybe he's comfortable in that

position. Or maybe it's his way of discouraging other passengers from sitting next to him. Or is it behavior more typical of a brash American tourist than a European? At any rate, his name is Jesse, which like Celine we will not learn until after this train ride is over.

The argument between the middle aged couple reaches its climax when the wife slaps the newspaper out of her husband's hands. Their verbal sparring continues, louder than ever. It's too much of an intrusion for Celine. Gathering up her book, purse and a bag from the overhead rack, she retreats to the back of the car. It's her discrete form of protest against the couple's rudeness. Caught up in their own affairs, they barely notice her departure.

Celine takes a seat across the aisle from Jesse, who is reading. He glances at her while she stuffs her bag into the overhead rack, then returns to his book. She glances at him while he isn't looking back, *twice*, then buries herself in her own book. Whether the ambiguous expression on her face signals "Leave me alone" or mild attraction is difficult to say. He surreptitiously looks at her again, then away. Rubbing his forehead and emitting a barely audible sigh, he seems to contemplate taking action. Celine is very attractive. But he thinks better of it and goes back to his book. The emotional distance between two strangers is not easily overcome in normal, polite society. Some of the best romantic comedies thrive on "meet cute" first encounters featuring outrageous behavior. Think of *My Man Godfrey* (1936), *Bringing up Baby* (1938) and *What's Up, Doc?* (1972). *Before Sunrise*, though humorous in spots, is not a romantic comedy. The conventional rules of social interaction are not so easily tossed out the window here.

In an overview shot of all the passengers, taken from the front of the car, we see a variety of situations: passengers alone, others with companions, some reading while others gaze out their Windows. No doubt most of them are aware of the minor disturbance at the front of the car. But

none of them are bold enough to openly complain about it, which would involve bridging the comfortable space between themselves and strangers.

The angry wife leaves her seat and walks quickly towards the back of the car, followed by her protesting husband. Celine and Jesse watch them pass by and exit, still bickering. Amused, Jesse silently, discretely, mouths the word "Wow!" Misery for some is entertainment for others. He and Celine share a smile over the spectacle they've just witnessed. Contact! Out of discord between one couple comes a moment of mild intimacy between two strangers who will eventually become a couple--a nicely ironic touch. Celine returns to her book. But Jesse, bolder now than when he first noticed her, exploits the moment to extend their brief contact. He inquires if she knows what the couple was arguing about. She leans closer but does not respond immediately. So he asks if she speaks English, addressing the *first* barrier to getting acquainted. If she doesn't, this relationship probably goes no further. She does, but apologizes for not understanding German well enough to translate the dispute for him. This is Europe, where people are perhaps expected to speak more than one language.

An American possibly intimidated by the attractive and multi-lingual woman who speaks English with a French accent and understands a little German, Jesse is uncertain how to proceed and retreats back into his private shell. Celine, wishing to pursue the brief opening he created and then abandoned, takes the initiative, offering an amusing, general comment on diminishing communication between couples as they grow older. Men and women, she alleges, gradually lose their ability to hear each other's differently pitched voices. Ironically, the topic of a *lack* of communication between men and women allows her to *expand* communication with Jesse when it was on the verge of fading out. Taking the bait she offers, Jesse complements Celine's remark

with a clever, philosophical summation of her point: "Nature's way of allowing couples to grow old together without killing each other." Celine is, as Jesse hoped she would be, amused and intrigued. Without making too much of this first exchange of dialog between them (after all, people will say almost anything to make a good impression on an attractive new acquaintance), it is curious that both characters initiate conversation with cynical statements about the absence of communication in romantic relationships. We discover later that both have reason to be cynical about such relationships.

The next, rather conventional step in getting acquainted is to inquire about each other's reading material, which by proximity presents itself for discussion. Celine, by coincidence or inclination, has the edge in sophistication. She's reading a George Bataille anthology that includes a story entitled "La Mort." Death is a subject she will bring up more than once in their later conversations. Jesse seems embarrassed to hold up the cover of *his* book: Klaus Kinski's *All I Need Is Love*. If we are what we read, the title alone paints Jesse as a sentimental romantic, contrary to his previous endorsement of Celine's disparagement of romance. And in view of the disappointing end to the romance that brought him to Europe in the first place (a future discovery for us and for Celine), the last thing he would want an attractive young woman to know about him at this moment is that he *needs love*. Yet he was indirectly responsible for introducing that topic into their conversation by asking Celine what she was reading, which led quite naturally to her asking the same of him. This is only the first of many conversations between them in which unintended consequences, some trivial and some serious, result from innocent actions. Conversational tone and topic turn on a dime. An argument can lead to a moment of shared warmth, and vice versa. For the moment, things are going well for our couple.

The combative couple returns, still sparring. And again they give Jesse an idea for advancing his acquaintance with Celine. He invites her to the lounge car from which the other couple just returned. She accepts, though her eyes betray a moment of doubt. Jesse too is a little awkward as he allows Celine to go first and glances back towards the front of the car. Does he fear his efforts are being scrutinized by other passengers? It's unlikely they have the slightest interest in him or Celine, so long as our couple doesn't disturb *their* privacy.

Playing the gentleman, Jesse opens two sets of doors leading to the lounge car, letting Celine walk through first. Generally speaking, the less intimate the acquaintance the more formal behavior tends to be. Being a *modern* man and woman, neither of these characters is very smooth at such formality.

Both sets of doors close between us and the lead characters. For a moment we are divided from them, as we were earlier from the young woman we saw enter a private compartment. Linklater reminds us that if not for the whim of the filmmaker this *could* be the end of our acquaintance with them. Instead we rejoin Jesse and Celine in the lounge car, bridging the physical space between us and them as we reconnect with their tentative journey towards intimacy. Keeping our set of railroad tracks merged with theirs for an extended period of time as they do the same with each other's.

Jesse inquires how Celine learned to speak English so well. She spent a summer at school in Los Angeles, and additional time in London. Seating themselves at a table, she turns the tables on Jesse, asking him the same question. "Me? I'm an American" he replies naively. "Are you sure?" she adds, having fun at his expense. It's a fairly aggressive joke for so new and fragile an acquaintance. Jesse, reacting as though he's experienced similar insults during his trip through

Europe, defends himself, but in a manner betraying his underlying feelings of cultural inferiority. “Yeah, I get it. So I’m the crude, dumb, vulgar American who doesn’t speak any other languages. Who has no culture, right? But I tried.” After taking four years of French language lessons, he tried to use them in Paris, but froze and failed. Celine unwittingly compounds the humiliation by correcting his faulty pronunciation of a French word. He pretends to be amused, but clearly is not.

For the sake of their budding acquaintance and his own wounded pride, Jesse changes the topic of conversation to something safe. But the discrepancy between their respective language skills will return later to exacerbate other conflicts, and not only in this movie. Jesse asks Celine where she’s traveling—as conventional a get-acquainted query as “What are you reading?” She’s returning home to Paris and school at the Sorbonne after visiting her grandmother in Budapest. “How’s she?” Jesse follows up, trying too hard to sound like an old friend showing interest in the welfare of a family member. It’s a little too soon for such familiarity. Celine laughs uncomfortably, yet answers politely. Jesse glances away from her, embarrassed by his minor faux pas. But they press onward. Neither has made a fatal mistake yet.

As she did with Jesse’s book inquiry, Celine returns Jesse’s question. He’s headed for Vienna, but just to catch a plane out the next morning. “You’re on holiday?” Celine follows up, logically. Jesse hesitates before answering. She’s unwittingly touched an emotional wound, as we discover later, and it’s much too soon for him to share it with her. “I had a friend in Madrid” he fudges, fidgeting nervously with the salt and pepper shakers on the table. He then quickly diverts their conversation to other, less painful matters, including his Eurail Pass and weeks of train travel. Their plunge into intimate details of each other’s lives will have to wait.

Celine obliges by pursuing Jesse's safer topic, asking him if his trip has been enjoyable. "Yeah, sure, it's been . . . It sucked." In mid-answer Jesse changes direction from polite lie to blunt honesty. Not the *whole* truth by any means, but enough to strip away one more layer of empty space between these two characters, allowing them to get to know each other a little better. Progress between them occurs in starts and stops.

As the level of intimacy between two passengers on *this* train grows, another train passes by, heading in the opposite direction, just outside their window. They ignore it, as its passengers doubtless ignore them. It passes so rapidly in and out of view that we cannot distinguish the individual passengers within it.

Backing away from a painfully humiliating confession, which Celine might pry from him by pursuing the meaning of "sucks," Jesse changes his tune. Weeks of train travel gazing out the window has been "kind of great." Celine is puzzled by his contradictory statements and requests an explanation. He prevaricates, then quite possibly *invents* an answer he did not originally intend. He claims riding the rails inspired ideas he would not ordinarily have had. She probes for more details, and he's ready to supply them. The idea he describes may or may not have occurred to him on this trip through Europe. Maybe he thought of it long ago, back in the United States. In either case, it suits his needs *now*, so he drags it out for the sake of invigorating his conversation with the intriguing woman seated across the table. How many stories do we embellish, falsify or invent on the spur of the moment to enliven a conversation we don't want to end?

Jesse's great idea is an access cable television show running all day, every day, for a year. Each twenty-four hour segment would focus in real time on the life of an ordinary person: three

hundred and sixty-five different subjects over the course of a year. Sounds like a more honest variation on so-called “reality” television programs of today.

Celine reacts to Jesse’s brilliant idea with skepticism. “All those mundane, boring things everybody has to do every day of their fucking life?” Not a likely fan of the show. “Oops” she adds, apologizing for her harsh language. She’s the first to introduce profanity into their conversation. They haven’t established many boundaries yet. Jesse defends his idea, translating Celine’s “mundane, boring things” into “the poetry of day-to-day life.” She is amused and impressed by his alternate description, but retains her negative opinion of the idea itself. Their mild disagreement is not a deal breaker for their new relationship. In fact it adds some humor and a little spice to it. Jesse has obviously given much thought to his idea, whether on trains traveling through Europe or before, and expands on it. Celine is amused and entertained. The two characters are now fully, no longer self-consciously, engaged in conversation.

Defending his TV show, Jesse asks why a man taking money out of an ATM machine shouldn’t be as interesting as a dog lying in the sun. He makes a valid point. In fact it’s pretty much the same point director Linklater and his colleagues make with this film about two people getting acquainted on a train, minus the extraordinary plot twists involved in Alfred Hitchcock’s exciting 1936 and 1951 variations on the same theme: *The Lady Vanishes* and *Strangers on a Train*. One style of storytelling does not invalidate the other. On the contrary, it’s fun and illuminating to compare and contrast them.

Celine tries to wrap her mind around Jesse’s idea, characterizing it as a National Geographic program about people instead of animals. He agrees. But she still has reservations, describing one potentially “boring” twenty-four hour segment with a three minute sex scene, immediately

after which the principle subject falls asleep. Note the subject is a *he*. Considered in retrospect, after many more revelatory conversations with Jesse, including one about Celine's most recent and very unsatisfying relationship with a man ("bad in bed" she complains), the choice of "he" is perhaps a reflection of her own unhappy experience. Like unequal language skills and cultural differences, gender tensions prove to be a recurring barrier between these two characters.

From a very different point of view, Jesse interprets Celine's hypothetical scenario as a potentially "great" episode that would provoke much discussion among viewers. It already has between Celine and Jesse. He expands on her contribution to his TV show by suggesting she and her friends in Paris could produce an episode. In theory, Jesse's television show would bridge a little of the space between people on a massive scale, spanning continents, though he admits to a distribution problem. How would he get hundreds of videotapes to all of the broadcast sites so they could play continuously? The spreading popularity of the internet and the development of the webcam would, in time, solve Jesse's problem. But he and Celine are having this conversation on 1994, not 2014. *Before Midnight* will address the technology of skyping.

The arrival of a waiter with menus for Jesse and Celine disrupts their train of thought. Linklater's camera discretely withdraws, as though we were leaving the lounge car and returning to our seat in the passenger car. The resumption of Purcell's traveling music on the soundtrack removes us from the private conversation between the film's main characters and returns us to a more general impression of train travel. But not before we hear, barely, Jesse's parting comment about Europeans not being service oriented. Specifically, he's unimpressed with the waiter's less than prompt service. Celine barely reacts. Maybe Jesse's comment, intentionally or not, is retaliation for her earlier joke implying that Americans are ignorant of any language, and perhaps

any culture, other than their own. At any rate, after a mostly pleasant conversation between two strangers who grow more and more comfortable with each other, the scene ends on a slightly sour note about what still potentially divides them. And that sour note, barely noticeable in this scene, will echo through their relations long into the future.

As the camera withdraws from Celine and Jesse, it gives us an overview of interactions occurring at other tables in the lounge car. Are the relationships we glimpse recent or long term, friendly or unfriendly? At least one, at screen right foreground, appears to be going well. Viewed from a distance now, Jesse and Celine have become a small, inaudible unit in the broader tableau of human interaction. Our connection to them, the camera reminds us, is tenuous.

A traveling shot of the passing landscape carries us from one scene to the next. The camera reverse zooms, adding Celine and Jesse to the image. It's *their* window through which we're looking at the outside world. By frequently juxtaposing the private world of his main characters with the distinctly separate world surrounding them, Linklater conveys to us both the beauty and fragility of the former. As before, Jesse and Celine ignore the scenery outside, including another train passing by, in favor of their private conversation, which we re-join in progress. Celine's voice returns to the soundtrack before she and Jesse back come into view. Talk is central to their acquaintance.

On each lounge car table sits a lamp in the shape of a globe, positioned between the occupants. It's a neat little metaphor of the world they share: a world unto itself, but also a bubble that could burst at any time.

Celine remarks on how her parents have always emphasized practicality over passion when it came to career choices in her young life. Her desire to be a writer became their encouragement to

be a journalist. Actress became television newscaster. It's a source of mild conflict between Celine and her parents. Revealing such private family matters signals an increase in her intimacy with Jesse since we last eavesdropped on them. They're no longer talking about a hypothetical television show. They're sharing stories about themselves.

Listening to Celine with evident interest and pleasure, Jesse leans comfortably against the windowsill. Both characters are visibly more relaxed with each other now. Jesse responds to Celine's childhood tale with a complementary one of his own. By the time he reached high school he was determined to do the opposite of what his parents wanted him to do. Not that parent/child conflicts discussed in this film are extreme. No one gets beaten, sexually abused or neglected. That's the point. Nothing melodramatic is allowed to intrude on the "poetry of day-to-day life." "It's just that I could never get excited about other people's ambitions for my life," observes Jesse. Precisely. There is plenty of passion and drama within an *ordinary* life to get excited and make movies about. Complaining about their parents is one of the things that draws Jesse and Celine closer together. They share comparable though not identical childhood experiences. Defining a common enemy, even if that enemy is not particularly threatening, makes allies of strangers.

Celine builds on Jesse's point, describing the fairly mild opposition of her own parents to her fanciful dreams as the kind of "passive/aggressive shit" she hates. Concurring with her gripe yet putting an optimistic spin on it, Jesse recollects his own childhood as a mostly "magical" time during which even his first encounter with death, that of his great grandmother, was softened and transformed into a pleasing ambiguity by his own imagination, in defiance of his parents' more pragmatic explanation of death as a final farewell. So even this relatively positive memory pitted

Jesse against his mother and father. As all children must do to some degree, both main characters declared emotional independence from their inevitably oppressive parents.

A close-up of Celine listening intently to Jesse's magical memory conveys her growing fascination and attraction. He supplies her with an optimism she lacks at the moment. Admitting to her abiding *fear* of death, including a very detailed vision of dying in an airplane explosion, she chose to return to Paris by train instead, which was lucky for Jesse. So far a marital spat between another couple and Celine's fear of flying are indirectly responsible for our two lead characters getting together. Two negatives combine to form a tenuous positive. It's pure chance, not fate, because equally coincidental factors will push them apart in later scenes.

The largely ignored world outside their train window finally, forcibly intrudes on their growing intimacy. Celine notes their arrival in the outskirts of Vienna. Jesse, looking directly into her eyes, voices disappointment at not having met Celine earlier. She fidgets nervously with the silverware on her plate, the way Jesse did with salt and pepper shakers during a previous awkward moment between them. Their longing gazes break off into mutual embarrassment. The spell of intimacy they conjured is broken by their awareness of impending separation. Strangers they were, and apparently soon will be again. Unlocking their mutual gaze is a natural defense mechanism. It's too early in their acquaintance for such blatant emotional honesty and the vulnerability that accompanies it. Such things typically come only with time and trust.

For the first time in the film the camera cuts to a shot taken from *outside* the train, on the platform alongside which the train has stopped. New passengers, one alone and two together, move in opposite directions. Are they boarding this train? A different train? Did they just disembark from another train? Like bus and airline terminals, train stations are places of constant

arrivals and departures, but little permanence. We expect to see Jesse disembark after his brief dalliance with Celine.

Surprisingly (well, not *that* surprisingly), the camera takes us back inside the train we just left. Jesse returns with his baggage in hand. From his subjective vantage point we approach Celine, still seated at the lounge car table, staring out the window, perhaps searching for Jesse on the platform. When she sees him returning, she smiles. It's a promising sign.

Jesse has an idea he admits is "insane," perhaps even more than his earlier idea for a cable TV show. But, he explains, if he represses it he will be haunted for the rest of his life. Taking Celine's curiosity and smile as an invitation to re-claim his seat at what was their table, he makes his pitch to continue their acquaintance by inviting her to get off the train with him and explore Vienna. Details are sketchy. He hasn't had time to invent them. But he's persistent, and shrewdly provides her with an escape clause from his bold proposal. "If I turn out to be some kind of psycho, you just get on the next train." "Psycho" might be overkill. "Annoying" or "boring" would have sufficed. But at least he had the guts to ask.

If Jesse is the bolder of the two, the burdens of trust and inconvenience fall squarely on Celine. She would be disrupting her return home to Paris to spend an evening wandering around Vienna with a virtual stranger who is scheduled to depart for his own home the next morning. Jesse isn't even sacrificing a good night's sleep, since he cannot afford a hotel room anyway.

Celine is amused but understandably hesitant. She just met the guy. Ever resourceful, Jesse sweetens the deal by improvising a reason why his outlandish proposal is to her advantage as well as his. Positing a hypothetical situation ten or twenty years in the future, he tells Celine to imagine herself in a marriage that's gone sour. She wonders what would have happened if she'd

picked up with one of the other men she encountered when she was younger. "I'm one of those guys!" he asserts. And if he turns out to be as big a loser as her spouse, the experience of learning so during a one-night detour in Vienna could be highly beneficial to Celine and her future husband.

It's a wildly imaginative, quirkily humorous, utterly specious argument. But if nothing else it demonstrates Jesse's interest in Celine. After another moment of hesitation she accepts his invitation. More than likely she was already attracted to Jesse before he got off the train. She'll reveal more about that later in the movie. A little giddy with success, Jesse leads the way out of the lounge car, motioning for Celine to follow. Not quite the formal, gentlemanly behavior he exhibited when they entered the lounge car.

Jesse's hypothetical scenario about Celine's marriage going stale in ten or twenty years eerily foreshadows events in *Before Midnight*, when she and Jesse are locked in just such a troubled marriage. The present is always haunted by the past, and in the present scene even by *speculation* about the future. The writers, director and actors who made *Before Sunrise* probably thought nothing of a sequel, much less a *second* sequel, while producing the original. But when they eventually got around to it, they had a wealth of past material out of which to construct the painfully deteriorating marriage Jesse so blithely exploits now.

First Jesse and then Celine step off the train and onto the platform. As they do so they cannot see each other's faces, but we can see both. Jesse appears less confident now than he was moments ago. Celine too appears to have doubts, hesitating before leaving the comforting safety of the train and its predictable schedule. If both characters are having second thoughts about joining forces in Vienna, neither openly admits it. So their adventure continues.

Recovering from his first flush of triumph, Jesse politely carries Celine's bag for her. They agree to store their luggage in a locker. Yes! They're talking again after their brief, awkward silence, but only about something trivial and safe. Getting off the train together is like starting their acquaintance from scratch, with the added burden of higher expectations. They're no longer skiing on the beginner's slope.

Two pairs of feet are shown walking side-by-side through the train terminal. They could belong to any couple, including one that's been together for years. Celine asks Jesse for his name. They talked for hours on the train, yet only now do they get around to exchanging such basic information. They *are* starting over. Typically names are the first things strangers learn about each other. Sometimes the acquaintance ends with that.

Jesse's given name is "James," but everybody calls him "Jesse," which he obviously prefers. He extends a hand to shake Celine's. Another traditional first greeting long-delayed in this unusual relationship. These two characters tend to plunge into more important stuff before bothering with formalities. "You mean *Jesse James*?" Celine inquires, perhaps wondering if she's getting mixed up with an American outlaw. He assures her not, in a manner suggesting he's heard that association before and doesn't like it. Wisely dropping the matter, Celine politely introduces herself and they shake hands, *again*. They're still a little awkward with each other.

Outside the terminal another train races by, on tracks beneath us. The camera tilts up to street level, where we see automobiles passing in a direction different from the train. People are going to and fro everywhere, yet none of them are visible to us. We're standing on an old bridge in Vienna. A pan to the left brings Jesse and Celine into view, walking in a direction different from

both train and automobiles. It's like similarly charged electrons repelling each other, except for the two we follow. And even *they* aren't that harmonious at the moment.

Jesse re-starts their dormant conversation by complimenting the bridge. Scintillating stuff! "Yeah," Celine agrees pointlessly. They don't even look at each other during this painfully clumsy exchange. Jesse cringes at the inanity of his remark. Celine finally looks at him and admits openly what they're both feeling: "This is kind of weird." They laugh, breaking the tension between them. It's interesting how many times during the course of the movie these two characters help each other navigate out of potential dead ends in their relationship. Taking his cue from Celine, Jesse does his part to bridge their impasse. "But it's all right" acknowledges the awkward space between them while refusing to let it derail their forward progress.

Celine puts them on a new track, distracting them from their pointless dialog by pointing to the guidebook in Jesse's hand and suggesting they find some interesting places to visit. Her plan takes them out of themselves and re-focuses their attention on something *else*: something emotionally safe, but more interesting than the bridge. It will take them a while to get back to the intimate exchange of personal histories they achieved in the lounge car. It's the difference between being casual friends and going on a first date together. The stakes are higher, therefore so is the pressure.

Further taking them out of themselves is an encounter with two young Viennese men whose advice they solicit about what sites to see in the city. Jesse inquires if either of them speaks English, as he did of Celine when they first met. The bolder of the two men fires back, "Do you speak German for a change?" It's intended as a joke, or so he tells a confused Jesse. But there is a slight abrasiveness in this amusing encounter. Perhaps the natives are a little fed up with

accommodating American tourists who make no attempt to do as the Viennese do while in Vienna. The native's question, which is more a statement of mild contempt, proceeds from the same cultural stereotype of Americans proffered by Celine back in the lounge car, when she poked fun at Jesse's limited language skills.

But this is not a movie about extreme, irreconcilable differences. The mild clash between Jesse and the Viennese passes quickly, with Jesse never quite realizing he was the butt of a joke. He asks the two men about fun places to visit in Vienna. "Museums, exhibitions?" adds Celine. The bolder native, again injecting his personal opinions into the conversation, insists museums are not that "funny" anymore. Unwittingly he exhibits the same language deficiency of which he indirectly accused Jesse. "Funny" does not mean the same thing as "fun." The Viennese native misinterpreted Jesse's meaning. His less abrasive companion points out, more pragmatically, that the city's museums will soon close for the evening. He inquires how long the strangers intend to be in Vienna. Jesse tells him just for tonight. The aggressive native reacts: "Why did you come to Vienna? What could you be expecting?" He sounds vaguely insulted by the brevity of their stay. He's proud of his city and thinks it deserves better from foreign visitors.

Jesse is stymied for an answer. He looks to Celine for support and she supplies it, ad-libbing a phony story as effortlessly as he did when he persuaded her to get off the train with him. "We're on honeymoon." It's a believable explanation, which Jesse promptly expands and overplays. "Yeah, she got pregnant. We had to get married." Maybe I'm reading too much into their cooperative effort to answer a vaguely hostile question from a stranger, but it seems curious that Jesse's contribution to their fiction implicitly blames *her* for trapping *him* into the marriage *she* invented. Does he harbor a resentment of women in general? And if so, why? We subsequently

learn of his bitter break-up with his most recent girlfriend, and also hear him complain about past girlfriends.

On the other hand, and more to the point of *this* scene, Jesse and Celine, moments ago so awkward with each other, now collaborate in a mild battle of wits with the two strangers. For the moment they are no longer French woman and American man. They are both tourists in unfamiliar surroundings, defending themselves against a foreigner's challenge. The experience helps make them a team.

The native calls their bluff. He doesn't believe either of them. All four characters laugh. No harm is done. And now it's the less aggressive native to the rescue, inviting the foreigners to attend a play in which he and his buddy will perform later in the evening. Judging from their description, it's a strange production staged by amateurs. They give the tourists a program and directions to the theatre. It's near the Prater Amusement Park Ferris wheel, famous for its role in the 1949 Carol Reed film, *The Third Man*. What an oddly interesting double-feature *The Third Man* and *Before Sunrise* could make: same setting—radically different stories. Celine is familiar with the Ferris wheel. She is slightly more at home in Vienna than is Jesse. The play begins as 2130. Jesse doesn't know what that means. 9:30 p.m. explains one of the natives, making another accommodation to the self-described "dumb American."

The four characters part company with a promise by Jesse and Celine to attend the performance of *Bring Me the Horns of Wilmington's Cow*, which is another German-to-English translation for Jesse's sake. Somehow out of Jesse's and Celine's need for advice about places to visit and the desire of two Viennese men to drum up business for their bizarre stage endeavor, these two sets of strangers navigated through some awkward moments to achieve a congenial, if

brief, acquaintance. Everybody smiles as the two couples walk away in opposite directions.

Appropriately this encounter occurred on a bridge, which by definition connects things that are divided by something: in this instance by culture and language. On the other hand, despite their promise, Celine and Jesse will never see *Bring Me the Horns of Wilmington's Cow*, reminding us again of the tenuousness of *any* connection between strangers.

Celine and Jesse are back on board a train--an electrified train that takes them deeper into the city. The train passes by a cathedral with twin spires, one of which is under reconstruction and surrounded by scaffolding. Like human relationships, buildings are in a constant process of either decay or renovation. In *The Third Man* it might have involved repair of damage incurred during World War Two. In *Before Sunrise* it's just necessary upkeep in the face of natural degeneration, which by coincidence foreshadows the crumbling state of relations between our hero and heroine in *Before Midnight*.

Inside the train Celine looks slightly uneasy, maybe a bit bored, as she and Jesse take a seat at the back of the car, where we can conveniently observe both them and, through the window behind them, the passing urban scenery. If Celine is tiring of her Viennese adventure, Jesse gives her no time to brood about it. He cleverly reinvigorates their fledgling acquaintance by proposing a game of Questions and Answers to learn more about each other. The guiding rule, established by Jesse, is that they have to answer each other's questions honestly. Celine agrees, with a smile. But is it an affirmative or a qualifying smile? Time will tell.

Jesse poses the first question, and it's a bold one for so early in their relationship. The abstraction of a game makes him more comfortable broaching so intimate a topic "Describe for me your first sexual feelings toward a person." Like his addendum to Celine's newlywed fiction

back on the bridge, Jesse opts for sex before romance. Is that revealing or merely a coincidence? Also interesting is that he poses his question in a thick, clichéd German accent. How many old American movies and television shows has he seen in which a nosy psychiatrist speaks with a German accent? Paging Dr. Freud! And what would the two Viennese men from the bridge, one of whom joked about Jesse's typically American ignorance of other languages, think of the way he uses their accent? We all carry in our minds stereotypes that are potential obstacles to communication with people from other cultures.

By the time Jesse asks Celine his first official Q and A question, his right arm is stretched out behind her, not yet embracing her shoulders but close. Fortunately for him, Celine is a liberal-minded young woman (Ahhh, those *French!*) who is not offended by his sexual inquiry. Her first such feelings were for a boy named Jean-Marc Fleury, a swimmer she met at summer camp. Jesse reacts to the name with a trace of contempt. What *French* name sounds manly to an American male? Then again, would Jesse approve of *any* guy about whom Celine admitted having sexual feelings? Exacerbating Jesse's thinly veiled disgust, Celine rhapsodically describes how Jean-Marc shaved the hair off his arms and legs in order to improve his speed in the water. She saw him as a "gorgeous dolphin." Jesse sees him as "disgusting."

For the first time since their lounge car adventure, Celine and Jesse talk about their personal lives instead of neutral matters such as a bridge or what tourist sites to visit in Vienna. Celine describes her brief acquaintance with the sexy Jean-Marc, her fear of her own attraction to him and of what she might have done with him. Her memories evoke feelings of guilt as well, since she practically stole the boy from a close friend. But the budding romance between Celine and her swimmer ended along with summer camp. They both promised to stay in touch, yet neither

did. Their connection wasn't sufficiently strong to overcome the distractions of separation. That experience will haunt and eventually shape the conclusion of her romantic evening with Jesse.

Halfway through her story, Celine turns her head away from Jesse and her hair falls in front of her face, obscuring his view of her. He reaches out to brush it aside, then quickly withdraws his hand as she turns back to face him. Despite asking a sexually frank question of Celine, he is afraid of offending her by getting too familiar *physically*. It's too early for that. Celine brushes back the hair herself and finishes her story.

Competing sights and the sounds of vehicular traffic outside the train, neither of which Linklater mutes, counterpoint and even compete with the conversation between Jesse and Celine, whose developing acquaintance does not occur in a vacuum. Environment can enhance or interfere with their relationship at any given moment. By making us aware of the largely indifferent though not unpleasant world surrounding the main characters, Linklater renders their private world all the more poignant.

Openly flirting with her for the first time, Jesse informs Celine that he is a fantastic swimmer, slyly implying he would make an excellent substitute for the long-absent Jean-Marc. "I'll make a note of that" she responds with a smile. Message received and under consideration. Celine turns her face away from Jesse and looks down, almost shyly. He tends to be more aggressive than does she. But his overtures are often more sexual than romantic. He is much more hesitant to commit himself to the latter.

Celine claims the next question. "Hit me," Jesse replies, confident that he is fully prepared for anything she might toss his way. Wrong. Looking Jesse straight in the eye, Celine inquires, "Have you ever been in love?" If he can flirt, she can up the ante. Hesitating, Jesse fires back,

“Yes. Next question,” which he quickly asks. This might be Jesse’s game, but Celine is better at it. She challenges his one-word answer, claiming to deserve more after her lengthy response to his question. The tension in this scene is never serious. Both characters are amused by their differences in outlook and style. But those differences will complicate their relationship down the road.

Defending himself, Jesse insists that sex and love are very different questions, and that while tight-lipped about the latter, he could have answered the former easily. Yet when he proposed the game he set no restrictions other than that both participants must tell the truth. It’s hypocritical of him to equivocate now. It’s not Celine’s fault that her first question is more emotionally probing than was Jesse’s. Nevertheless he cleverly turns the tables on her by asking if *she* would have answered the “love” question honestly. Celine admits she would have lied, which violates the rules of the game and seems to validate Jesse’s terse one-word answer to *her* question. But in her own defense Celine claims she would have at least made up a “great story” to render her answer more interesting for him.

Feeling vindicated by Celine’s admission, Jesse declares love to be a complicated issue. By way of example, he admits he once told a girl he loved her and meant it, but adds that it was not an “unselfish, giving, beautiful” sort of love. In other words he answers Celine’s question indirectly, by challenging the validity of love itself. “It’s like, love . . . I mean, I don’t know. You know?” What an expressively inarticulate summation of the puzzle of love.

Reacting to Jesse’s cynicism, Celine averts her gaze from him, somewhat sadly. But she quickly recovers, looks at him again and acknowledges, “Yeah, I know what you mean.” Her tone of voice is reserved, but sincere. She’s not just agreeing with him for the sake of avoiding

an argument. Our general impression is that neither character has had much success in matters of love.

Returning to a subject with which he is much more comfortable, Jesse answers the first question he posed to Celine instead of the one she asked him. Now *that's* a new rule. But in fact he doesn't even answer his own question honestly, claiming his first sexual feelings involved a *Playboy* magazine centerfold named Crystal. No actual human contact, no romantic complications and no disappointing endings. Just a happily impersonal fantasy. But at least he's entertaining, as Celine claimed her dishonest answer to the "love" question would have been.

For his next question Jesse asks, "What really pisses you off?" Celine's initial response is, "*Everything* pisses me off." Including, perhaps, guys who are evasive about love? Jesse probes for specifics and she supplies some, none of them related to love. They've had enough of that topic for a while.

Celine hates being told by strangers, specifically men, to smile so they can feel better about their own "boring" lives. It's a strange answer. Does it relate to her former boyfriend, about whom we learn later? Or is it a more general, feminist complaint about men expecting women to decorate and uplift their lives? Jesse has much to learn about this woman, as do we. The gender gap is evident from the very beginning of *Before Sunrise*.

Celine also hates the war (circa 1994) currently raging in the former Yugoslavia, in which the rest of Europe prefers not to get involved. She is politically aware and conscientious. Probably more so than is Jesse, who has nothing to say on the topic. She also hates that the media are trying to control our minds in some new fascist way. But she offers no details to support her claim.

Finally, Celine hates not being taken seriously in foreign countries, “especially America,” where her serious attitude is too often regarded as French “cute.” In other words she doesn’t appreciate being reduced to a shallow gender or cultural stereotype. And maybe it’s because she regards Americans as the worst offenders that she earlier reduced her new American acquaintance, Jesse, to a similar stereotype by teasing him about his paltry language skills.

The sheer number of annoying things Celine digs up on the spur of the moment is surprising. Who knew this congenial young woman had so much anger bottled up inside. Jesse inquires, ‘Is that all?’, humorously implying that it’s quite a lot. Celine looks away from him, embarrassed by her outpouring of honesty. She fidgets with her fingers, quietly admitting there’s more. But she prefers to switch the focus of interrogation back onto Jesse. In the game of Q and A, Q is usually the position of power.

Jesse’s silence during Celine’s lengthy answer to his question may in itself be revealing. He seems surprised at the passion behind her opinions. He also seems intrigued, maybe even attracted. There is, however, a moment during her answer when he unwittingly does to Celine what she, to his obvious annoyance, did to him back in the lounge car. He corrects her faulty English (“media,” not “medias”) the way she corrected his faulty French. Turnabout is fair play. Neither character reacts to his corrective as though it were an offensive (to her) or gratifying (to him) act of retaliation. But in the conversational give-and-take that is the core of their relationship through this movie and two sequels over a period of almost twenty years, these subtle repetitions and variations acquire meaning and significance.

When it’s Celine’s turn, she repeats Jesse’s question, phrasing it a little differently. “What’s a problem for you?” He, in turn, interprets that question differently than she interpreted his. Jesse’s

short reply, unlike his short answer to her first question, is surprisingly, shockingly honest, and very personal. "You, probably." Just two words suggest that Celine is rapidly becoming an emotional problem for the typically glib, detached Jesse. He has, briefly, doubled back on the topic of love that she introduced and he avoided earlier. Celine doesn't understand his meaning. She laughs. He laughs. Then he turns away from her, rubs his forehead as he did back on the train when he first noticed her sitting across the aisle from him, and immediately changes the subject to something abstract and emotionally safe. Something as impersonal as *Playboy's* Miss January 1978.

Poking fun at himself, Jesse compares his revised answer to the cable television show idea he divulged in the lounge car. Both ideas came to him, he claims, while riding on trains through Europe: that long vacation from himself and from what was *really* on his mind at the time. But let's return to the present. These two characters have a sufficient history together to make clever references to their previous conversations. Celine echoes Jesse's mockery by gritting her teeth, shutting her eyes and taking in a sharp, cautionary breath. Oh, no! Not a re-run of that boring TV show! They're both having fun with their recently shared past. And it's a good sign for their future together, if there is to be one.

Jesse's "problem," aside from his growing attraction to Celine, is with the idea of reincarnation, in which Celine admits some degree of belief. So on the heels of sharing a private joke about their previous, mild difference of opinion about Jesse's TV show, the possibility of another disagreement rears its head. Removing his jacket and getting more comfortable, physically as well as with Celine, Jesse launches into a detailed critique of reincarnation based on the idea that the math doesn't make sense: too few original souls to account for the

burgeoning population over millions of years. "Is that why we're so scattered? Is that why we're so specialized?" he wonders aloud.

Celine is confused about Jesse's reasoning and seems about to disagree with him when he pre-emptively counters her counterattack by admitting, "It's a totally scattered thought." But then he promptly reverses direction and adds, "Which is kind of why it makes sense." Why shouldn't fragmented souls produce scattered thoughts? Celine agrees with him, though perhaps more out of amusement than anything else. They share a laugh, taking neither her final question nor his final answer too seriously.

"Let's get off this damn train" Jesse proposes. *Damn* train? Is he tired of playing Question and Answer? Has it made him too vulnerable? From an audience perspective it's been a successful ice-breaker for these two characters, bringing them closer together than they've been since the lounge car. From inside the train we watch them exit. They walk out of the camera frame looking much like a couple who have been together for years. Maybe even like the young honeymooners they pretended to be for the two Viennese men they met on the bridge. Jesse slings his jacket over his shoulder. Celine walks beside him. Simultaneously another young woman gets *on* the train while another young man takes up a position on the sidewalk just outside, apparently, judging by his posture, waiting for someone. Waiting in the same spot where the young woman probably stood only moments ago. Have these two strangers just missed having a close encounter that might have led to an adventure like the one we're following.

Alt & Neu (Old and New), a music shop containing a wide selection of music in a variety of recorded formats, is the next stop on our merged railroad tracks tour of Vienna. The shop's eclectic mix of music, illustrated by old 45's hanging from the ceiling, American LP albums

stacked in bins with German labels, and an old gramophone player, among other artifacts, is a pleasant setting as well as a fitting metaphor for the melding of different opinions, concerns and points of view in the developing relationship between the lead characters.

Typical of a more experienced couple, Jesse and Celine are comfortable exploring the store separately, knowing the other is nearby. When Jesse rejoins Celine she shows him a recording by Kath Bloom, about whom a friend told her. Jesse is not familiar with the artist. I'm only guessing, but it doesn't sound like his type of music. Nevertheless he politely invites Celine to listen to the LP with him in a nearby sound booth. They close the door behind them. Alone at last! Jesse, Celine and Kath Bloom. The tune is "Come Here," a quietly passionate song about a woman and her reticent lover. Is Celine more familiar with this music than she let on? Does the singer speak for her, or do the romantic lyrics come as a surprise to both characters?

The remainder of this scene is shown in a prolonged medium close-up of Celine and Jesse, standing close to each other in cramped quarters, silently reacting to the song and to each other. Concentrating on the music, they initially appear distracted, not really looking at anything. Then Celine glances at Jesse. He glances back. They quickly break eye contact. She looks back at him and smiles. He looks back at her and she immediately looks away, her expression of fondness changing to one of indifference. The change is subtle, not melodramatic. She's not feigning hostility. She's merely concealing her increasing attraction to him.

Jesse smiles at the song's lyrics. Does his smile say "I like this music" or "I knew she'd like this kind of crap"? Whichever the case, Jesse is considerate enough not to interrupt the song with sarcastic commentary. Celine glances at Jesse. He looks away. She looks down and smiles. The lyrics now speak about love taking its course. The singer asks her lover to "come here." Celine

looks up at Jesse again. But when he returns her gaze, she quickly looks away, again putting on her mask of indifference.

Kath Bloom sings “No, I’m not impossible to touch.” Possibly influenced by her words, Jesse tentatively moves his face towards Celine’s, which is turned away from him. Does he intend to kiss her? She suddenly looks at him, and he abruptly averts his eyes. Even though Celine’s expression is welcoming, Jesse aborts whatever romantic maneuver he contemplated. He is intimidated by the directness of her gaze.

And so it continues as Kath Bloom sings about overcoming pride, timidity and other emotional impediments to love. Each moment of direct eye contact between Celine and Jesse ends in nervous evasion: a retreat to the wall, the floor, the ceiling, anywhere but the eyes of the other person. Yet when either character looks at the other without being observed, he or she does so with obvious attraction. The song’s passionately direct lyrics catch Celine and Jesse too soon in their young acquaintance to make an open admission of that mutual feeling. “Come Here” is both an enticement and an embarrassment to them.

Cut to the next scene. Jesse and Celine walk under a blue sky through a historically rich section of Vienna, surrounded by ornate buildings, sculpted shrubbery, spectacular fountains and sculptures depicting legendary lovers. Young men and women are gathered together in friendly conversations on green lawns. Sharing a smile with Celine, Jesse exults, “Look at this. This is beautiful!” His comment refers as much to sharing the experience with Celine as it does to the scenery.

Carried over from the previous scene, and dominating the soundtrack in this one, an instrumental passage from “Come Here” conveys what the characters are feeling but cannot yet

express directly. Freed from the cramped confines of the sound booth, Jesse and Celine are now able to enjoy each other's company while exploring old Vienna. That activity takes them emotionally out of themselves just enough so they can pour their enthusiasm for each other into *it*.

Bloom's music fills the soundtrack, reducing local sounds, including dialog, to secondary status as a new scene begins. We are now, thanks to that music, officially in a montage, each shot contributing to an overriding impression of Jesse and Celine *becoming*, not talking or thinking about becoming, a romantic couple. They run to catch a city train. On board they converse comfortably, unselfconsciously. Awkwardness is banished for the time being. Meanwhile Kath Bloom sings "Well, I'm in no hurry." It's the one ironic note her song contributes to this montage. Celine and Jesse *are* in a hurry. Their acquaintance is scheduled to end the following morning.

Linklater's use of "Come Here" as a transitional device between scenes, and then as an aural link connecting a montage of shots, adds a great deal to our understanding and appreciation of what is transpiring between the two main characters. Initially employed to counterpoint the awkwardness of their reactions to each other in the sound booth, the song then emotionally *propels* them into the brief scenes that follow, in which they are completely at ease and in tune with each other, and therefore in ecstatic harmony with the music. In an odd way it reminds me of a similar use of music in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film, *A Clockwork Orange*. The character Alex uses a recording of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* to spice up his bedroom fantasies after an evening of all-too-real ultra-violence. The music carries over into the next two scenes, which occur the following morning, where it plays in ironic counterpoint to Alex's lethargic

hangover. The reverse is true in *Before Sunrise*. The combination of Kath Bloom's song and the main characters unselfconsciously exploring Vienna together generates the most unabashedly romantic impression I can think of from *any* movie. As they get off the train together, Celine lightly grabs hold of Jesse's arm. It's a gesture of familiarity, affection and trust, executed without conscious thought. Unlike earlier when Jesse made a half-hearted and *very* self-conscious attempt to brush Celine's hair away from her face.

"Come Here" fades out. A new scene yields a new location. A rabbit scampers through a wooded area empty of people. Spotting it, Celine remarks "It's so cute." Is this going to be a sappy scene of "cute" romantic confession? Jesse tries to match her interest in the rabbit, but obviously fakes it for Celine's benefit. He looks away from the animal before she does. So much for *shared* experiences. So many scenes in this film start out counterpointing their predecessors.

The camera pans with the characters as they enter the small Cemetery of the No-Names. Celine recalls visiting the place as a teenager, and that it made a bigger impression on her than Vienna's more famous tourist attractions. Has she led Jesse here by design, to share with him a memory that means a great deal to her? Or do they encounter the cemetery by chance? Celine seems genuinely surprised to see it.

On her previous visit Celine spoke with the groundskeeper, who told her most of the people buried in the cemetery were unidentified drowning victims whose bodies washed up along the shores of the Danube. No need to cue the famous "Blue Danube" Waltz here. This is a quiet, somber, reflective scene. Dating from a century ago and therefore long-forgotten, most of the victims, according to Celine, were suicides.

Through a slowly tracking, low angle camera, we stroll leisurely through the cemetery with

Celine and Jesse. We seem to occupy the vantage point, if they still had one, of the dead and buried, so rarely visited now by anyone who gives a damn about them. Celine admits being attracted to the idea of “all those unknown people lost in the world.” A peculiar attraction, until she explains further. “When I was a little girl I always thought that if none of your family and friends knew you were dead, then it’s like not really *being* dead. People can invent the best and worst for you.” No wonder she enjoyed Jesse’s childhood fantasy of seeing his dead great-grandmother live again in the sunlit spray of a water hose.

Celine finds the grave that holds the strongest memory for her--that of a young girl named Elisabeth, who died at the same age (thirteen) Celine was when she first visited the cemetery. “Now I’m ten years older and she’s still thirteen, I guess.” Is she sad for the forgotten Elisabeth? Or envious of Elisabeth’s supposed immortality, frozen in time, no longer susceptible to decay and regret? Does Celine’s previously expressed fear of dying, as opposed to death itself, have its roots in her encounter with this grave? If Celine’s fascination with Elisabeth were more pathological, this scene would take us back to Kim Novak’s character and the cemetery scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. A haunting scene in which a phony Madeline Elster fakes obsession with the long-dead Carlotta Valdez for the purpose of deceiving police detective “Scottie” Ferguson (Jimmy Stewart) and encouraging *his* obsession with *her*. But Celine is neither seriously disturbed nor a criminal. By disclosing her recollection of this cemetery and its thirteen year old resident, Elisabeth, she tries to share an intimate part of herself with Jesse.

“That’s funny” Celine remarks with more tenderness than humor, pondering the age disparity between Elisabeth and herself. Jesse is an interested and respectful observer throughout much of this scene. He and Celine exchange several tender glances just before it ends. But they are

juxtaposed, not shared glances. No eye contact is made. Maybe they've reached a stage where they are capable of understanding without necessarily looking at each other? They silently leave the cemetery, probably with a deeper bond of understanding between them.

We linger for a moment after Celine and Jesse exit the camera frame. Perhaps a little reminder that Elisabeth, whose extinct vantage point we occupy, is once again alone, unremembered and un-mourned. The conjoined train tracks that brought her memory together with two other young people from a different century and different countries have separated once more. Celine and Jesse continue with *their* journey.

The famous Prater Ferris wheel at twilight. Now we're on Jesse's preferred turf, less introspective and more lighthearted than Celine's graveyard. From inside one of the wheel's compartments high above Vienna, we peer out over the famous city. Celine points to the Danube. Jesse inquires, "That's a river, right?" Celine, amused at his geographical ignorance but no longer making fun of him, confirms. But would *she* be able to identify the Ohio or Columbia Rivers in the United States?

Jesse's uncertainty about the Danube might have something to do with the fact that he's got something else on his mind. Moving tentatively from window to window he comments, "This is gorgeous," but not in the unselfconscious manner he pronounced the historic fountains and buildings of Vienna "beautiful" in an earlier scene. He cautiously approaches Celine and tries to set the stage for his first serious attempt to get physically romantic with her.

Sunset, Ferris wheel, the perfect time for a . . . Jesse cannot bring himself to say "kiss." Not because he's shy. After all, he was bold enough to invite her off the train to explore Vienna with him and then to ask her about her first sexual attraction. More likely he's intimidated by Celine's

intelligence. She's going to recognize his romantic maneuver for what it is, and he doesn't want to sabotage this exciting evening before its scheduled ending. Fortunately for him, Celine not only knows what he wants before he tries and fails to tell her, she wants the same thing. "Are you trying to say you want to kiss me?" she asks. Relieved and grateful, he nods his head and silently mouths the word "Yes." Like their first encounter on the train to Vienna and their first moments after getting off that train together, this scene involves a new, more intense level of intimacy between them. They're starting over, again.

Jesse cautiously waits for Celine to initiate the kiss. It's a long, passionate yet gentle kiss, followed by a long, mutual gaze. We can almost see them assessing the implications. Celine moves in for an encore, but slides past Jesse's lips and instead hugs him tightly, burying her head in his neck and shoulder. She wants, perhaps *needs*, real intimacy, not just a short-term make-out session. Jesse sympathetically responds in kind, pressing his face into Celine's shoulder, holding her close and shutting his eyes. It's a mutual surrender. The absence of dialog during this critical moment in their young relationship speaks volumes about what they're feeling. No time for glib banter now.

We descend to ground level of the amusement park, where a crowd of people are having fun, enjoying carnival rides and sightseeing. Jesse and Celine are among them, enjoying their post-first-kiss release from tension. Jesse is in a great mood, full of confidence in the wake of his success in the Ferris wheel. He presses a button on a carnival game called Punch Belly, which triggers lively *American* dance music. Feeling right at home and no longer afraid to touch her, he grabs Celine and dances vigorously with her. She laughs with delight. Next he elbows Punch Belly in the gut, showing off his prodigious physical strength to his new girlfriend. The

expression on his face and the movement of his body suggest he put everything he had into that punch. But it registers only 70 on a visible scale of 100. Objectively speaking, it's not an impressive effort. But who cares? He raises his fists in triumph anyway.

We join the characters a short time later as they stroll through the amusement park at night, deep into another conversation, ignoring the colorful sights around them and very comfortable now sharing details of their personal lives. Maybe they're *too* comfortable. After the intimate kiss and embrace they shared on the Ferris wheel, it's deceptively easy to assume that total harmony has been achieved and can be sustained. Celine talks at full throttle about her relationship with her parents. "But you know what?" is her invitation to Jesse to learn more about her life. "What?" signals his acceptance.

Celine expounds on the inevitable emotional gap between parents and children from *any* generation. Her own parents were 1960's French radicals who fought the usual battles for personal freedom and social justice, then settled into a successful upper class lifestyle, of which Celine admits she has reaped many rewards. She lacks for neither parental love nor personal freedom. Yet "we still have to deal with the same old shit, but we can't know who or what the enemy is." In other words Celine feels deprived of clarity in her life, of clear choices between good and evil, right and wrong. Earlier, in the lounge car, she struggled to make villains of her parents by complaining about their persistent efforts to transform her childhood fantasies into practical realities. Now she almost wishes they had created much larger obstacles for her to overcome.

Jesse offers a different slant on Celine's hypothesis, reflecting his different experiences as a child. "I don't think there really is an enemy." That sounds positive, especially for Jesse. Until he

adds, “*Everybody’s* parents fucked them up. Rich kids’ parents gave their kids too much. Poor kids parents not enough. . . They either left them or stuck around and taught them the wrong things.” It’s a bleak view of family relations in which everyone is fated to fail. Then we get to the possible root of Jesse’s cynicism. His parents didn’t get along with each other, yet tried to be nice to him. He concludes this private revelation with an awkward, dismissive gesture that betrays more pain than it tries to conceal.

Interested in Jesse’s story, Celine inquires if his parents are divorced. Yes, he tells her, adding that they should have parted much sooner but stayed together for the sake of their two children, Jesse and his sister. Again Jesse makes an awkward gesture of dismissal to deflate the emotional significance of what he just revealed. “Thank you very much” he concludes in a snooty, upper class accent (is he mocking the British now?) meant to poke fun at his parents’ lame effort. Was his original comment about there being no real generation gap an attempt to conceal a deep resentment of his own parents and a deep distrust of marriage?

Descending to the heart of this private darkness, Jesse recounts an incident in which his mother, during an argument with her husband, told Jesse his father didn’t want him to be born in the first place. Ever since that painful revelation (or was it an exaggeration, even a fabrication, intended to hurt the husband but inadvertently scarring the child) Jesse claims to view the world as a place where he wasn’t meant to be. A variation on this recollected incident occurs in Linklater’s 2014 film *Boyhood*, in which another child of divorced parents, Mason, overhears his mother complaining to her self-centered boyfriend about her frustrated desire, as a single mother, to have time to do the things *she* wants to do rather than always cater to the needs of her children.

Celine sympathizes. But Jesse has either wisely overcome or cleverly evaded the emotional trauma of his father's alleged rejection. "I eventually took pride in it, like my life was my own doing, or like I was crashing a big party." Celine offers a perfunctory approval of his philosophical consolation, then dives back into the story of her own parents. There is certainly an exchange of personal information between the characters in this scene. They get to know each other better. But sometimes they talk more *at* than *with* each other, each eager to reveal his or her own life story and opinions rather than absorbing what the other has to say.

In contrast to Jesse's, Celine's parents have had a happy marriage, as far as she knows. "But I just think it's a healthy process to rebel against everything that came before." So the focus of attention has returned to *her* family relationships and *her* need to rebel, even if she doesn't know why or against what. "Yeah, yeah," Jesse responds as perfunctorily as Celine did at the end of *his* last personal disclosure. Like all of us, they sometimes fake the intimacy they pretend to feel. Whether having a conversation with an old friend or a new acquaintance, it's not uncommon to talk more about yourself than to inquire about and empathize with the other person. That way *your* story defines the terms of how you both see the world. It's a competition.

For most of this scene the camera backtracks with the main characters, making us a silent, unacknowledged participant in their conversation. It's a nice feeling, being a member of a private club. During a pause in the dialog the camera reverses angle and follows the couple from behind for a few moments, allowing us to observe another couple pass by, walking leisurely in the opposite direction. They're too wrapped up in their own private world to pay much attention to Celine and Jesse. We hear an undecipherable snippet of their conversation before the camera returns to a frontal backtracking shot of *our* couple.

Celine briefly notices the other couple as they walk by, supplying her with a new topic to reinvigorate her momentarily lagging conversation with Jesse. "Do you know anyone who's in a happy relationship?" she inquires. It's a reasonable question in the wake of Jesse's comments about his incompatible parents. And considering her new romantic involvement with Jesse, it's prudent of her to sound him out about the possibility of long term success. His initial response, like his first reaction to Celine's remarks about the inevitable conflict between parents and their children, sounds optimistic. He *does* know some happy couples. Then he adds the qualifier, "But I think they lie to each other."

Surprisingly, Celine concurs. And she has a story to back it up, telling Jesse of her grandmother's recent confession that she spent most of her life pining for a man who was not her husband, and accepting her unhappiness as fate. Before this revelation Celine had always assumed her grandmother's love life was uncomplicated. But like her contradictory feelings about death, afraid of dying yet attracted to the immutability of the deceased Elisabeth, Celine finds her grandmother's plight both sad and appealing--the latter because it reveals hidden depths of feeling in the older woman that her granddaughter hadn't suspected. The richness of individual life we seldom see in each other. Who knows what experiences enrich the lives of the couple who walked past Jesse and Celine only moments ago. Celine assumed they were happy together because that's what her first and only impression of them suggested.

Predictably Jesse, the cynic who grew up in a broken home, throws a wet blanket over Celine's romantic fascination with her grandmother's frustrated passion. "I guarantee you, it was better that way. If she'd ever got to know him, I'm sure he would have disappointed her eventually." No doubt the ghost of his unhappy parents has had some influence on that bitter conclusion. And

so, in retrospect, does the ghost of his own as yet undisclosed breakup with an ex-girlfriend in Madrid.

Celine, not pleased to have her romantic bubble burst, challenges Jesse's challenge. She points out that Jesse knows nothing about her grandmother or the man she secretly loved. Jesse defends his opinion with a general observation about the false "romantic projections" we make of other people. From one (his parents), two (he and his former girlfriend) or possibly more (earlier girlfriends) specific examples, he constructs a general principal of the false promise of love, then uses that general principal to pass judgment on a third example (Celine's grandmother and her secret love), the details of which he knows very little.

Unfortunately for Jesse, Celine undermines his glib cynicism by making an example of *him*, reminding him of all the romantic rhetoric he fed her up in the Ferris wheel a short time ago. Talking of sunsets, beautiful scenery and a perfect moment for a kiss, he projected romance all over the place. Was it all, judging from his low opinion of other romantic relationships, just a ploy to get her to kiss him?

Bested and flustered, Jesse tries to divert the conversation back to the topic of Celine's grandmother. Laughing at him, she refuses to allow it. So he seeks escape outside their private little debate, jumping on a nearby merry-go-round and playfully poking at her, like an immature schoolboy trying to hide his real feelings. As the scene ends, Jesse is out of the camera frame altogether while Celine relishes her sweet victory alone. It's been a curious, contrary yet interesting ride since their embrace at the end of the previous scene. Perhaps they've experienced a necessary reality check. By no means have they broken up as a couple. But they have encountered some new, unexpected obstacles along their journey, and had fun while doing so.

After all, if you can't trust a person you care for to take you to task once in a while, whom *can* you trust?

Later that evening a romantic couple rides by in a horse-drawn carriage. Very traditional, but it's not Celine and Jesse. They're on the cut-rate, do-it-yourself tour of Vienna. As the carriage rolls out of view, two robed monks enter the camera frame, walking together in the opposite direction. We follow them as they stroll towards an outdoor café. They are not a romantic couple, as far as we know. But as friends, they're another type of couple.

Jesse and Celine are seated at a table outside the Kleines Café. From their vantage point we observe the two monks pass by, talking with each other. We cannot hear what they say, but Jesse invents dialog for them. He has one of them confess to the other that he's wearing no underwear under his robe. Celine is mildly amused. But what were the monks *really* discussing? Were they joking about Jesse and Celine, or about the couple in the carriage? And did *that* couple, in turn, comment to each other about the monks? Three distinct couples are juxtaposed in the opening two shots of this scene. Each couple is absorbed in its own private world of shared perceptions and observations, in which the other two couples play only fleeting, trivial roles. The same trivial role Jesse and Celine played in each other's private worlds until they struck up a more intimate acquaintance on board the train to Vienna.

At the end of the second shot in this scene the camera pans left with the monks, visible in the background, and catches up with Jesse and Celine, seated at a table in the foreground. Focusing initially on the monks, the camera stops and re-focuses on the main characters, allowing the monks to disappear out of the frame. They disappear just as quickly from the thoughts and conversation of Celine and Jesse, who re-focus their attention on each other. So many

encounters result in so few connections, which is not necessarily a bad thing, as we soon discover.

Part of the fun of being a couple is to share confidences about other people who are not part of your shared space. Occasionally making jokes at their expense. The characters played by Woody Allen and Diane Keaton did it memorably in *Annie Hall* (1977). Jesse and Celine continue in that tradition.

Ignoring the departed monks, Celine and Jesse turn their attention to each other. "Can I tell you a secret?" he asks. She leans in closer to hear it. Will it be another revelation about his childhood? His parents? His sister? No, it's merely a ploy to lure her within kissing range. No problem because she enjoys it too, though maybe not as much as he does. Laughter from nearby draws their attention to another table, where a gypsy palm reader in full costume plies her trade with another young couple. It's now Celine's turn to do the commentary on someone outside her and Jesse's intimate circle. Typically, she is less sarcastic in her observations than was Jesse. She finds the palm reader interesting. Jesse agrees, but probably just to be agreeable. He doesn't seem to share Celine's interest in the stranger.

The object of our couple's latest commentary catches them looking at her. Linklater keeps her in focus while Jesse is out of the camera frame altogether and Celine barely in it and out of focus. We feel the intrusion of the gypsy's stare. She's spotted her next prey. Meanwhile a man seated alone, smoking and reading a newspaper at a table between our couple and the palm reader, enjoys immunity from her. Sometimes it pays to mind your own business.

The camera warily circles left as the palm reader circles right, making her way to Celine and Jesse's table. Another table enters the camera frame as she does so. It is occupied by two men

and one woman talking among themselves, paying no attention to the gypsy and in turn ignored by her. Jesse and Celine are at first displeased by the palm reader's invasion of their private space. But as she gets closer their reactions differ. Jesse does not want his palm read. Celine consents to it. From the camera's new perspective, at the end of its circling movement, Celine and the gypsy appear together to the right of an umbrella pole that divides the screen into two segments. Jesse alone occupies the smaller segment on the left.

Celine exchanges a few conspiratorial "what-have-I-gotten-myself-into" glances with Jesse, but then quickly surrenders herself to the gypsy's slick salesmanship. Gently caressing her customer's hand, the palm reader describes Celine as a "stranger to this place," which was not difficult to guess after Celine requested their business be transacted in either French or English. Then she refers to her customer as a "seeker, an adventurer in your mind," with a keen interest in the power and creativity of women. Celine smiles at these compliments. But the palm reader carefully balances the good with a modicum of bad. Closing Celine's fingers, she warns, "You need to resign yourself to the awkwardness of life. Only if you find peace within yourself will you find true connection with others." Is this supernatural insight into Celine's character? Or a conveniently vague mix of flattery and caution that almost anyone could, if so inclined, apply to his or her own life. Even if she has no supernatural powers, the palm reader is a keen judge of her customers' strengths and weaknesses, inclinations and disinclinations.

A new camera angle brings Jesse back into the equation as the gypsy turns her attention to him. Before reading his palm she cleverly elicits from Celine that Jesse is almost a stranger, not yet a lover. Perhaps with that in mind she gives Jesse's hand only a cursory examination and tells Celine, "You will be all right. He's learning." This vague and less than flattering assessment is

delivered with none of the sober intensity of Celine's reading. Of course Celine is a *paying* customer. Jesse is not.

The palm reader bluntly demands payment. If Jesse and Celine devoted only a moment's attention to the passing monks, the gypsy devotes only a bit more time to them, and even that only for a profit. It's time to seek out her next potential customers. Celine pays the bill. Jesse watches the transaction with amused contempt. Departing, the palm reader turns back to them and describes them both as stardust, the glorious product of stars exploding billions of years ago. How poetic. Then she dances off, laughing.

Is the palm reader laughing at how wonderfully celestial we all are, including Celine and Jesse? Or is she laughing at the gullible pigeon she's just conned out of money? Her sunny "stardust" pronouncement is spoken while she holds up the money Celine gave her. Is she celebrating the young couple, or her own salesmanship? In either case she leaves these tourists with smiles on their faces and an amusing memory from their night in Vienna. Maybe they'll tell friends about it and they in turn will want their palms read if they vacation in Vienna.

But unbeknownst to the palm reader, she's left our couple with more than just an entertaining recollection. Waiting until the gypsy departs, Jesse cautions Celine not to take her analysis and prognostication seriously. Perhaps only half-seriously, or maybe not, Celine defends the older woman. Accepting that challenge, Jesse contemptuously dismisses the palm reader's mystical logic, then unwittingly betrays an emotional motive for his negative review. He was offended by her condescending comments about him. Reinforcing his argument, he pretends to be a *real* palm reader telling an old lady her *real* fortune: a bleak prospect of unrelieved boredom and eventual death. And he expects her to pay good money for that gruesome forecast?

Jesse uses Celine's palm in his dramatic performance. By pretending to be an honest palm reader, he discredits Celine's apparent belief in the gypsy's flattering assessment of her. We don't really know how seriously Celine regards that reading. If she believes in reincarnation, which she half-heartedly admitted a few scenes ago, maybe she also believes in the credibility of telling fortunes. Or maybe, like many audiences at a "magic" show, she enjoys *pretending* to believe for a short period of time. A suspension of disbelief, like we all do when we allow ourselves to get emotionally involved in a movie.

Annoyed at Jesse's attempt to spoil her fun, Celine jerks her palm away from his hand and retaliates by reminding Jesse the palm reader barely noticed him. She not so subtly implies that his bruised ego is the motive for his cynicism. Describing the palm reader as "wise and intense," Celine concludes with, "I really love what she said." And she mounts her counterattack with much humor in her voice and facial expression. Is she merely baiting Jesse because he irritated her? Playing devil's advocate on behalf of the gypsy in order to knock him down a peg or two?

Jesse retaliates, claiming Celine loved what the palm reader had to say because it flattered her. Pushing his argument further, he jokingly offers to search the seedier parts of Vienna for some illegal drugs to make her feel even better. Celine flips her middle finger at him, a nearly universal gesture that needs no translation. Jesse counters her hostility with mockery, reminding her they're both "stardust," including the young skeptic who is currently pissing her off.

The scene ends with both characters looking away from each other while pretending to share a laugh. But Celine's laughter is loud and forced. Jesse shakes his head, rolls his eyes and briefly frowns, as if he were thinking, "What a ditz!" Which in less heated moments he knows very well she isn't. Fortunately neither character says what they're really thinking and feeling at this

moment. And we must remember it *is* only a *moment*. But in such moments friendships can end and lovers can part forever.

What an interesting route the sidewalk cafe scene has taken, beginning with a two-against-the-world alliance between Jesse and Celine and ending with an awkward disagreement resulting from one brief intrusion by that outside world. The absurdity of arguing over a palm reader, as compared to politics or religion, illustrates in starkly dramatic terms the fragility of sustaining a good relationship. It's a great scene, beautifully performed and filmed.

The battle continues, in a different form, later that evening as Celine and Jesse walk down a deserted street. Without speaking they playfully kick at each other's ankles. Typically, Jesse overdoes his kick. Celine, protesting the mild pain he inflicted, flips him the bird again, then adds a French curse for good measure. The dumb American won't even know what hit him. But the breach between them cannot be too serious, because she's still smiling. And this time that smile is sincere.

Visible at right foreground in the first shot of the scene is the temporary cure for their troubles: something that will distract them from themselves, including their recent disagreement, and focus their attention on a neutral topic. It's a poster, pasted on a streetlamp, advertising an upcoming exhibition of works by Georges Seurat. The exhibition has already ended, but Celine's familiarity with and interest in Seurat's work revives her friendly dialog with Jesse. His interest in the artist is obviously less than hers. He doesn't have much to say. But he seems genuinely interested in her thoughts on the topic.

Celine is intrigued by Seurat pictures reproduced on the poster because they show people overwhelmed by and disappearing into their environments. "His human figures are always so

transitory.” Again, she is preoccupied with death, loss and anonymity. Jesse’s attention grows keener as he listens to Celine talk with quiet passion about Seurat’s work. When she asks him if she used the English word “transitory” correctly, he assures her she did. No jokes or jabs this time about comparative language skills. This is an unobtrusively healing scene.

Jesse and Celine survived their brief falling-out at the end of the previous scene. They quietly, unselfconsciously re-built their intimacy in this one. And all it took was an obscure poster on a pole along their winding path through Vienna. Then again, all it took to divide them in the sidewalk cafe scene was a brief encounter with a passing stranger—a stranger who was initially a source of amusement to both of them.

Our couple approaches a towering cathedral. Another couple, holding hands in the background, walks past the same structure. Neither pair notices the other. Where is the other couple going? Where have they been? What is the state of their relationship? “Ships that pass in the night” is such a cliché, but it remains a valid metaphor. Meanwhile a lone man in a suit and tie, carrying a briefcase, hurries past Jesse and Celine, going in the opposite direction. He appears to be heading somewhere on business. The only acknowledgement between strangers in the opening shot of this scene occurs when the driver of an automobile beeps his horn impatiently as Celine and Jesse cross the street in front of him. There’s not much traffic here, vehicular or pedestrian, at this time of night. Yet the driver still perceives the only other people in sight as an irritating obstruction. Our tolerance of each other, especially of strangers, can be pathetically meager at times.

Silence permeates the cathedral’s interior. A traveling shot pointed up at the ceiling shows us a number of painted Biblical scenes. The camera tilts down to show us Celine too gazing up at the

ceiling. Our ceiling view, while not strictly subjective, approximates hers. She seems comfortable here. Sitting in a pew next to Jesse, she tells him about visiting a similar cathedral with her grandmother in Budapest. As she continues to glance around the cathedral, Jesse gazes at *her*. Celine and what she has to say is more interesting to him than are their surroundings.

In a respectfully, or habitually, hushed voice, Celine claims to reject formal religion, yet sympathizes with people in distress who come to church looking for help. "It fascinates me how a single place can join so much pain and happiness for so many generations." Like the Cemetery of the No-Names, where the tragedy of suicidal, anonymous death mingles with, at least for Celine, an appealing sense of permanence.

Jesse, in an equally hushed voice, observes that Celine is emotionally close with her grandmother. True. She has twice spoken fondly of her grandmother and several times less fondly of her parents. By now, after becoming better acquainted with Celine, Jesse might be qualified to ask about her grandmother's well-being, a question he prematurely asked back in the lounge car. Celine acknowledges a special kinship with her older relative. Though slightly embarrassed to do so, she explains that it's because she always feels like an old woman herself, about to die. "My life is just memories" is a deeply personal feeling of impermanence and loss harkening back to her fascination with the forgotten, suicidal Elisabeth and Seurat's portraits of individuals fading into their stronger environments.

Linklater depicts Celine's intimate disclosure in a tight close-up of her and Jesse. In a reverse shot, equally intimate, Jesse responds in kind, counterpointing yet this time not contradicting Celine. "That's so weird" he remarks, because he sees himself as a young boy "who doesn't really know how to be an adult, pretending to live my life, taking notes for when I'll really have

to do it.” In other words behind the smug sarcasm we’ve occasionally seen from him when he discredited someone or something lies a fundamental insecurity about himself. Both of these characters are less afraid now than at first to expose their vulnerabilities to each other.

Touched and amused by Jesse’s disclosure, Celine sums up their meeting of opposites. “So up there in the Ferris wheel it was like this very old woman kissing this very young boy.” He concurs, then fondly touches her hair--something he wanted yet hesitated to do in an earlier scene. She looks away, not rejecting but a little nervous about their new level of intimacy. For once their differences bring them closer together rather than drive them further apart. Jesse releases her hair and launches into his recollection of a Quaker wedding he once attended. He’s changing the subject, distracting Celine from any uneasiness she might be feeling about their private disclosures. Yet he’s talking about a *wedding* while sitting in a *church* with a woman about whom he cares a great deal. His story is a kind of marriage proposal, once removed and therefore safe, yet nonetheless revealing.

According to Jesse, Quaker weddings end with the bride and groom staring at each other in silence for an hour or so, after which they are considered husband and wife. That suggests less emphasis on ritual and more on learning to be close to each other, which is not an easy thing to master. Celine likes the idea. Jesse openly stares at her. Is this a “dress rehearsal” for real life, as he previously described the actions of his thirteen year old persona? There is nothing glib or smug about the expression on his face now. Intimidated by the sincerity of his gaze, Celine looks away. She’s not yet ready to reciprocate what she sees in his expression. Jesse’s intense gaze continues for a few more moments. Then, with a subdued expression of disappointment (at her unwillingness to reciprocate?), he too looks away. Shaking his head, he distances both of them

from their emotionally clumsy matrimonial moment by telling her “a horrible story.”

Celine’s eyes return to Jesse. She is more comfortable now that he’s off on one of his sarcastic tangents. He tells the tale of an atheist friend of his who played a cruel joke on a homeless man, holding out a hundred dollar bill to the latter and asking, “Do you believe in God?” Assuming the stranger was offering him money in exchange for a declaration of faith, the homeless man replied “Yes, I do.” The atheist yanked the bill away, declaring “Wrong answer.” Not a nice trick to play on anyone, but nevertheless convincing evidence that people often say and do things for personal gain rather than from conviction.

In the middle of Jesse’s story the camera cuts to a frontal medium shot of both characters, less intimate than the preceding series of close-ups. In a cathedral where Celine expressed some sympathy for the faithful, Jesse questions the piety of their motives. Both agree the action of Jesse’s friend was “mean.” Yet the way Jesse told his story implies that he agrees with his buddy’s skeptical view of human nature, if not with his method of proving it. Just as he earlier questioned the truthfulness of the palm reader and the rationality of her gullible customers. And yet, in spite of their different views on numerous subjects, Jesse and Celine conclude this scene with a mutual, sustained gaze into each other’s eyes. They enact their own mini-version of the Quaker wedding Jesse described, with no witnesses other than themselves. This time Celine does not look away.

If past scenes are any indication, the next one should in some way contradict the feeling of intimacy that concludes their cathedral visit. Celine and Jesse walk along the bank of the Danube River. In full couple’s mode now, they hold hands. Jesse, as usual, overplays his part, nibbling on Celine’s fingers a bit too aggressively. “Owe!” she complains, though no more seriously than

when he kicked her ankle. But then what begins as a perfectly innocent conversation about what might have happened if they hadn't gotten off the train together unwittingly stumbles and fumbles its way into a serious argument: their second of the evening, but with potentially more serious consequences.

Jesse paints a mock sentimental portrait of himself crying at the airport because Celine refused to get off the train with him. She kisses him in equally mock conciliation. It's a playful lovers' game of "What if?" Celine extends it further, telling Jesse that if she hadn't joined him in Vienna she probably would have gotten off the train in Salzburg with some other guy. She's joking, of course. Jesse reacts with feigned outrage. "So I'm just the dumb American momentarily decorating your blank canvass." That's the first time "dumb American" has entered their conversation since Jesse spoke it defensively when Celine joked about his typically American lack of language skills. In other words that slight wound to his ego is still rattling around in his mind and can resurface at any time, in any conversation between them, with unpredictable consequences. On *this* occasion Celine deftly deflects any potential danger by grabbing more tightly onto Jesse's arm and insisting that she's having a great time. He agrees. There is no trace of facetiousness in either of their voices.

They're on to a new topic. Celine tells Jesse she's glad she doesn't know any of his other acquaintances because they might tell her bad things about him. He jokingly offers to reveal some of those bad things. Instead Celine confesses a fault of her own, claiming she often approaches romantic relationships like a military general conquering an enemy, probing for weaknesses and manipulating her opponent. "It's horrible" she admits, using the same word with which Jesse described his atheist story.

Then comes the question that accidentally triggers an avalanche. Celine inquires what Jesse would find irritating about her if they were together all the time. Whether she realizes it or not, she's speculating on their prospects for a long term relationship. Jesse prudently refuses to answer, explaining that he once did answer that question at the request of a former girlfriend. Angered by his honest reply, she broke up with him. "All she really wanted," he concludes bitterly, "was an excuse to tell me what she thought was wrong with *me*." After a moment's reflection on that unpleasant memory, he stupidly and recklessly transposes the past onto the present. "Is that what *you* want? Something about me bugs you?" Unbelievable! He just declined to answer that very question because of its potential for disastrous consequences. And now he asks it of Celine after rudely implying that she asked it of him in the first place because she, like his ex-girlfriend, wants an excuse to criticize him. On the contrary, I suspect Celine's initial question proceeded from insecurities about her own, not Jesse's, long-term appeal as a lover.

Celine denies playing such an underhanded game, though her previous revelation about treating romantic relationships like combat doesn't lend her much credibility. Her tone of voice suggests that she's annoyed by Jesse's backhanded accusation. Idiotically he persists, asking her again what flaws she sees in him. Her prior irritation, combined with his persistence, triggers a blunt answer. She didn't like Jesse's reaction to the palm reader. A past dispute, amicably settled and presumably forgotten, is suddenly resurrected as ammunition in the heat of a *new* argument. Celine *was* offended by Jesse's remarks about the gypsy. She has *not* forgotten about them, any more than he forgot the "dumb American" (admittedly his description, not hers) insult she slyly delivered back in the lounge car. Bygones will not be bygones. Adding fire to the fuel he already poured on their present irritation, Celine describes Jesse's behavior back at the sidewalk café as

that of a “rooster prick.” It’s an odd expression, at least to my ears, but nevertheless a potent insult.

Jesse reacts to the provocation he provoked. “Rooster prick?!” he repeats with emphasis, and they’re off and running. Defending her argument, Celine piles on the insults, which just flow out of her now. “You were like this little boy whining because all the attention wasn’t focused on you!” Jesse fires back, “This woman robbed you blind!” Celine interrupts him, repeating her previous attack in slightly different but equally demeaning terms. Jesse clenches his fist (in frustration, not as a physical threat) and retaliates. “I don’t care what this charlatan has to say about anything!” Even more so than at the end of their palm reader dispute, these two characters are yelling *at* rather than speaking *to* each other. And it’s difficult to see how their new disagreement could end in anything but a serious split. Or, if they survived it as a couple, become a potential time bomb that might explode during some future argument. Could Jesse and Celine in time become the next George and Martha from *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? Celine is about to raise the level of confrontation once more, challenging Jesse’s description of the palm reader as a “charlatan,” when they are inadvertently rescued by outside intervention--the very thing that *created* dissention between them at the end of the sidewalk café scene.

In the same manner and for the same reason as the palm reader, a young Viennese man seated on the river bank, apparently homeless, calls out to them, drawing their attention away from each other and towards him. From selfish rather than altruistic motives, he coincidentally deflects their approaching train wreck onto a different set of tracks. It’s curious how the outside world can either aggravate or diminish tension between two acquaintances. Our couple began their journey together as an indirect result of two other people arguing.

The itinerant poet has to shout in order to get the attention of the quarreling tourists. He addresses them in his native German. Celine explains that she understands a little German, but Jesse doesn't at all. She doesn't say it in a demeaning way, just as a point of fact to facilitate communication with the Austrian. Nevertheless the ghost of "dumb American," which clearly has the power to hurt Jesse, rears its ugly head once more. Briefly looking away from the tourists out of annoyance, the poet grins as if to say, "Another uncultured American." But he has something to sell, so he accommodates Jesse's shortcomings and makes his pitch in English.

Instead of just begging for money outright, the poet will ask Jesse and Celine for a word and then incorporate that word into a new poem written just for them. They can then pay him whatever they think the poem is worth. And he'll write in English, he adds, sweetening the offer. Jesse and Celine are intrigued. More importantly, they are distracted from their prior dispute, though a whiff of that argument lingers when Celine suggests the word "milkshake" for insertion into their poem. It's a word she employed earlier in a metaphor describing Jesse's childish behavior regarding the palm reader. Irritated by her choice, Jesse sarcastically offers as an alternative another leftover from their argument, "rooster prick," but agrees to "milkshake." So the poet is tasked with creating a poem around a word that signals discord to the couple he's trying to please. Meanwhile, passing unnoticed behind all three of them is another couple getting along just fine, for the moment. This anonymous couple is spared the solicitation directed at Jesse and Celine. They don't seem to need a distraction from each other.

"Milkshake" is an unusual word to use in a poem. The poet is nonplussed for a moment, then goes to work with determination. Cigarette in one hand, pencil and notebook in the other, he appears the classic street artist. Jesse and Celine walk away, giving him some private space

in which to create. Jesse reaches out to take Celine's hand, the way they began this scene. But he thinks better of it and withdraws his offer. The camera lingers for a moment on the poet. Visible behind him, colorfully illuminated by the lights of Vienna, is the surprisingly rapid flow of the Danube, which will play a metaphorical role in the poem he writes. He's a savvy salesman who knows how to please his tourist clientele.

Stopping a discrete distance away, Jesse and Celine agree they both like the poet. Then Jesse returns to the subject of their disagreement earlier. Celine tries to deny it was a fight, but Jesse insists it was. Reluctantly agreeing, she rationalizes it into something positive. "There's a lot of good things coming out of conflict." Maybe she's thinking of the "healthy" rebellion of children against their parents that she described earlier. But it didn't look like anything "good" would result from her most recent dispute with Jesse. Not wishing to stir the pot at this juncture, Jesse politely concurs with Celine's optimistic spin. If he could only learn to *expect* life to be difficult, he adds, maybe he could be happy when nice things happen. He makes the latter point while gesturing towards Celine, the "nice" thing that's happened to him recently, in spite of their contentious moments together. It's a pleasant, healing touch.

Celine and Jesse expand their general discussion of conflict to include, from her, school and, from him, an inclination to be overly competitive. But then Celine applies his confession to their brief history as a couple. Is competitiveness why he tried to persuade her to get off the train with him? Jesse asks her to explain her meaning, his tone of voice a bit harsher now. Could this be the trigger for yet another argument between them? It wouldn't take much to set them off.

Indications of renewed tension between Jesse and Celine are heard off-screen after the camera cuts to the poet completing his work. He shyly approaches them. Or is he just pretending to be

shy in order to ingratiate himself? In either case, for the second time in as many minutes he unwittingly saves the couple from themselves. Celine asks him to read his poem out loud. The poet gives a fine rendition. It's a clever poem about lovers who, like Jesse and Celine, recently met by chance and are trying to fill the gap between themselves with mutual understanding. "You have no idea where I came from. We have no idea where we're going." Like entangled branches in a river, they are carried irresistibly downstream, clinging to and in effect carrying each other. "Don't you know me? Don't you know me by now?" he concludes.

As the poet recites his work Celine glances at Jesse, already applying the poem as a metaphor of their new acquaintance. Handing the piece of paper on which he wrote the poem to Celine, the poet stares soulfully at the tourists. Like the palm reader saying farewell by telling them they're both "stardust," it may be pure salesmanship. Even so, the tourists seem impressed by his work, rewarding him with a little money for his effort.

The poet expresses sheepish gratitude as Celine and Jesse say goodbye and depart. But when he resumes his hunting perch at river's edge, his parting glance in their direction is less sentimental. He tosses his cigarette into the river. Is he displeased with the meager size of the stipend they gave him? Was the cigarette just a prop for the role he played for a couple of gullible tourists? Is he already thinking about his next targets? Meanwhile Celine and Jesse, alone again, give their *honest* opinions of him, now that he's out of hearing range. Celine thinks the poem is "wonderful." Jesse pretends to agree, unconvincingly. Pressed by Celine for his real opinion, he tentatively suggests the poem was written before they ever encountered the poet, and that the word "milkshake" was cleverly inserted for the sake of making a sale. Puzzled, Celine asks for further explanation. Backing away from his cynical remark, which may have been

validated by our final impression of the poet, Jesse recants, claiming "I loved it. It was great." He's obviously lying in order to prevent another argument. Rolling her eyes, Celine clearly doesn't believe him. Jesse walks faster, putting distance between them as the scene ends. Sure enough, this ending counterpoints that of the scene that preceded it. Their one-night relationship is proving to be a rollercoaster ride.

Later, on a Viennese back street where young people hang out in front of a nightclub. The club's exterior wall is covered with graffiti. This is a little tougher neighborhood than we visited in the sidewalk café scene. Viewed initially from a considerable distance, Jesse and Celine are almost as far away from each other emotionally. They're not feuding, but neither are they holding hands. As the scene begins Jesse is giving one of his philosophical lectures, this one about Time and how people waste so much of it. He alleges we do nothing useful with the spare time provided by modern technology. More easy cynicism. Celine, clearly not interested, dismisses Jesse's observation with a terse reply. "Time is so abstract anyway." And while she pays little attention to what *he* says, Jesse is distracted from *her* by an attractive young woman passing by. Celine challenges him about it, though with good humor. Was he looking at that girl? He feigns innocence. It's only a momentary episode, quickly over and presumably forgotten. But as we've already seen in this relationship, nothing is ever completely forgotten or discarded. A future argument could easily dredge up this seemingly trivial incident.

Jesse and Celine have spent hours together, enjoying the sights and sounds of Vienna, conversing passionately about many things and for the most part enjoying each other's company. But no one, not even a potential lover, can be fascinating all the time. A little boredom here, a little distraction there, and they're off the tracks altogether. Celine's lack of interest in Jesse's

lecture on wasted time and Jesse's brief distraction by an attractive stranger are subtle warning signs of how any relationship can slip away.

Jesse pays for their admission to the nightclub. Is he trying to make up for his brief indiscretion? Inside the club the atmosphere is smoky and colorful. A musician performs a folk song on stage, accompanying himself on acoustic guitar. Jesse and Celine pause to enjoy the show, which again supplies them with a needed respite from each other. Other patrons do the same, while still others come and go or converse in private groups.

The musician sings passionately about life and its fragility: "Involve me, I'll understand" and "Feel my life pumping through me." Our couple could use an injection of such passion about now. The song concludes, getting a nice reaction from the crowd, including Jesse and Celine, who then adjourn to the bar and the beer Celine promised to buy Jesse in return for the price of admission. "Do you think Old Milwaukee is expensive here?" Jesse asks. We don't need to hear Celine's answer to know what a silly question that probably is in Austria. The "dumb American" strikes again. But we're *all* dumb tourists somewhere, sometime.

In the games room the atmosphere is more hard rock than folk. Jesse and Celine set up camp at yet another appealing distraction: an old-fashioned pinball machine. Hanging on the wall nearby is a poster advertising a movie entitled *Unsane*, promising "total destruction" and lots of action: precisely the opposite of *Before Sunrise*. Working the pinball machine, Celine seems to have absorbed some of the bar's edgy atmosphere and the promise of the movie poster on the wall. She slaps the mechanical beast and from habit curses loudly in French when she loses her pinball. Like the bickering middle-age couple, the two Viennese thespians on a bridge, the palm Reader and the poet, the machine takes our couple out of themselves, for better or worse.

As Celine and Jesse switch places, he looks surprised yet intrigued by her brief flash of temper. Since they are no longer arguing about anything, what aggravates her? Launching his own pinball, he opens a new and important topic between them, inquiring if Celine is currently dating anyone. He's fishing for information about his own prospects with her. Grasping her bottle of beer she tells him, "No, not right now." The beer relaxes them, helping them converse comfortably with each other. Reading between the lines of her answer, Jesse concludes that Celine recently *was* dating someone. He takes out whatever frustration that fact causes him on the machine that just swallowed his pinball. They switch places again. The popular game has become a subtle part of their dialog.

Celine broke up with her last boyfriend six months ago. Jesse offers the standard condolences, then more honestly admits he's not *that* sorry, which is a roundabout way of saying he'd like to take the guy's place. It's a repeat of his remark long ago that he is an excellent swimmer, implying that he could replace Celine's old boyfriend from summer camp. Prompted by Jesse, Celine explains her recent breakup in more detail. It's useful information for Jesse if he plans on becoming her next boyfriend.

Sounding as cynical about relationships as Jesse claimed to be many scenes ago, Celine describes her ex as "very stupid, bad in bed" and "alcoholic," then facetiously wonders out loud why they didn't work out. The ex-boyfriend's complaint about Celine was that she "loved him too much," blocking his artistic expression. The key information in this little tale of failed romance is that *he* dumped *her*. Celine lavished her love and devotion on an unworthy man. She wants love but has good reason to be wary of offering it in return, despite the advice of the folk singer in the other room.

Obviously needing to get something off her chest, Celine reveals that after the breakup she went to a psychiatrist for help: a *female* psychiatrist who she assumed would sympathize with her plight. During their sessions it came out that Celine had written a short story about a woman plotting to kill her boyfriend. The shrink turned hostile, accusing Celine of plotting the same fate for her own ex. Jesse jokes about that same dark coincidence, but Celine assures him it was “just some writing,” not something she would ever do. He teases her again by facetiously claiming to understand. But when he learns the shrink phoned the police about her, his sympathies return entirely to Celine.

The happy ending to Celine’s bizarre tale is that she’s “totally over” her former lover, though a little nervous that in the event of his untimely death she would be a prime suspect. “Why do you become obsessed with people you don’t really like that much?” she asks and sums up simultaneously, ending her narrative by seeking a broader understanding of her experience. In a sense she and Jesse act as each other’s psychiatrists in this scene, each allowing the other to unload accumulated emotional baggage under safe circumstances.

Turning Jesse’s initial question back on him, as she did in an earlier scene during their Q and A session, Celine inquires if he’s currently dating anyone. He avoids a direct answer by diverting her specific question into a broader, more abstract discussion with which he is more comfortable. “I kind of see love as this escape for two people who don’t know how to be alone.” So yearning for love is in itself a character flaw? What a facile answer. Reading between his words, Celine cuts to the heart of the matter. “Who just broke up with *you*?” By now she knows Jesse well enough to see that much of his worldly cynicism is just his reaction to specific, bitter, personal experiences.

Jesse reluctantly reveals the truth about his trip to Europe. But the length and passion of his tale of romantic woe suggests that he really wants to tell it and get it out of his gut. He flew to Madrid from the United States intending to spend the summer with his girlfriend. Momentarily alarmed by that news, Celine asks for clarification. *Ex*-girlfriend he reassures her, putting them on equal terms. They're both available. Dismissing his former girlfriend's art history studies in Spain as "asinine," Jesse matches Celine's contempt for her ex-boyfriend's artistic aspirations. I wonder what their ex's are saying, perhaps to new lovers, about Jesse and Celine.

Jesse's girlfriend had already lost that lovin' feeling before they reunited in Madrid. But like most people she was reluctant to tell him the brutal truth. He had to figure it out for himself. And like Celine he sums up his sad story with a broader observation about the heartache of love. The worst part of getting dumped, he asserts, is that you realize the dumper thinks as little about you after the breakup as you thought about people *you* previously dumped. In other words he and Celine have suffered far more pain over their recent breakups than have their former lovers. But at least Jesse acknowledges the pain he caused the women *he* dumped in the past.

After sharing their experiences of rejection, Jesse and Celine commiserate with each other. They even *joke* about their pain, which helps alleviate it. She advises him to find happiness by concentrating on bright colors—advice from her former psychiatrist for which she paid far too much. "Did it work?" Jesse inquires, then turns it into yet another joke by remarking that it didn't help her pinball skills. They enjoy a laugh together. Celine brags that she hasn't killed anyone lately. He pronounces her cured. She flashes him a look as if to say, in jest, "Don't bet on it!" He doesn't notice, concentrating instead on the pinball game. A close-up of that pinball action concludes the scene.

Playing a simple, distracting game while discussing painful memories of disappointed love helps Celine and Jesse forge a deeper understanding of each other. The nightclub turned out to be a very beneficial stop on their journey together. This scene, like the one before it, ends the opposite way it began. A relationship that seemed at low ebb as they entered the nightclub is now rejuvenated. More at ease with each other again after their nightclub conversation, and knowing that neither of them is romantically involved with anyone else, Jesse is emboldened to make a pitch for sex. And though couching it in the form of a pseudo-scientific metaphor, he's about as subtle as a train wreck. If he had attempted such a maneuver much earlier in their acquaintance, Celine would not have tolerated it. Now she will, though without necessarily yielding to it. Nor will it build trust between them.

The first shot in this new scene is of Jesse's and Celine's feet ascending stone steps in tandem while Jesse's off-screen voice describes a breed of monkeys that supposedly have sex all the time and are consequently peaceful and happy. But when the camera cuts to a shot of their faces, it's obvious they have different opinions on the matter. To Celine, Jesse's vision of simian utopia is just a selfish male fantasy. He counters that female monkeys enjoy free sex too. Joy to the world! And as if his motivation wasn't obvious enough, he briefly imitates a monkey. Me Tarzan, you Jane. Celine challenges Jesse's dubious egalitarianism by wondering out loud if feminism isn't just a male plot to increase their chances of fooling around by calling it freedom for women. Is this an example of Celine's vaunted rebellion against her liberal parents?

His monkey metaphor rejected, Jesse switches tactics. Maybe reproductive theory can rescue his plea for sex. Jesse paints a fantasy of one man occupying the proverbial desert island with ninety-nine women. At the end of one year the island's population has increased by ninety-nine

babies, in sad contrast to a second hypothetical island inhabited by ninety-nine men and only one woman, the result of which after one year is only a single baby.

Putting aside the obvious problems of future inbreeding, Celine counters Jesse's argument with some equally rational challenges. Sexual competition among ninety-nine men, all pursuing one woman, would likely result in violence, maybe even death. That sounds like a point in favor of the *other* island, which Jesse prefers anyway. But Celine foresees trouble there as well. The ninety-nine women would have ganged up on the one man and "eaten him alive." Not to mention that on a hypothetical island where procreation without love is the rule, the women too might want to maximize competition among their prospective mates. From their point of view, having only one male to satisfy their needs would not be desirable.

Ignoring the callous disregard his own preferred utopia shows for individual women, Jesse interprets Celine's vision of one man destroyed by a group of women as evidence of a more general female desire to destroy men. And like so many generalizations in their many discussions so far, Jesse's proceeds from a specific, personal experience involving another of his unlamented former girlfriends. She allegedly used an unpleasant encounter with four rude males to almost get Jesse beaten up. The unwitting irony within his parable are the four men who insulted one woman in the first place, triggering the hostile response from her that almost got Jesse in deep trouble. Celine laughs heartily at the woman's retaliatory insult, obviously empathizing with her.

While making his larger point about women wanting to destroy men, Jesse imitates his former girlfriend's actions, glancing back at the men who insulted her, flipping them the bird and insulting them. By coincidence a young man passing by Jesse and Celine at this moment turns

and looks at Jesse, who is too involved in his own performance to notice him. If the stranger had mistakenly thought Jesse's insult was directed at *him*, the result might have been an argument or even a brawl, based purely on a misunderstanding. Misunderstandings are a common occurrence in the nebulous space between people—even people who get to know each other well.

Jesse's summation is better argued. Women do occasionally play both sides of the coin with men, sometimes complaining about their excessive territoriality, at other times accusing them of being "unmanly or wimpy." Celine tries to mount a counter-argument while at the same time wrapping Jesse's arm affectionately around her waist. He withdraws that arm when she insists men are more capable of destroying women than the other way around. But her heart isn't really in this debate. Neither of them is in a mood to pick a fight with the other. Maybe they're both "learning," as the palm reader said of Jesse.

Walking away from the stationary camera hand-in-hand, along a romantically lit cobblestone street, past another quaint sidewalk café, Celine and Jesse again appear to be a happy couple. To their right another apparently happy couple converses privately. Jesse remarks to Celine about their gender debate, "It's like a skipping record. Every couple's been having this conversation forever." "And nobody came up with anything" Celine adds. Crisis averted.

In yet another adventure-filled Viennese back street our couple encounters a belly dancer performing for a small crowd. She is accompanied by a male drummer. Her husband? Jesse is at first wary of what is, to his American eyes, a strange scene. Celine, recognizing the dance from a documentary she once saw, pulls him towards it. She calls it a "birth dance." As they watch the performance Jesse begins to move his feet in a dance step that does not in the slightest resemble the one he witnesses. But when he glances at Celine intently watching the belly dancer, he stops

dancing, clasps his hands passively behind his back and feigns a pose of serious attention. He does not want to antagonize Celine again, the way he did regarding the palm reader and the poet. Yet he cannot stop fidgeting and focus on the performance. Instead he looks around at other people in the audience. When the performer concludes, he claps with exaggerated, phony approval. Celine's gaze never left the dancer. Her applause is more sincere.

The belly dancer passes a hat, soliciting payment for her efforts. Jesse, with Celine's approval, tosses a few coins into it, adding with customary cynicism, "Everything that's interesting costs a little money." Like a palm reading or a poem. After leaving the scene of the performance, Jesse feels more comfortable challenging Celine's reverence for the "birth" dance, suggesting it looked more like a "mating" dance. Maybe that's because he's had sex on his mind for quite some time. Celine patiently explains the idea behind a birth dance. Less than captivated, Jesse tries to show off for her by performing a little coin trick. She doesn't even notice it, so he discretely withdraws the coin. Little business like this reminds us of the inevitable differences between two people, no matter how much they care for each other.

As she explains in detail about how women in some parts of the world use dance to ease the pain of childbirth, Celine notices two young men seated along the street, staring at her. She glances back at them while passing by. Jesse notices neither their interest in Celine nor her reaction. Perhaps fortunately, he's missed an opportunity to retaliate for Celine's comment, outside the nightclub, about him sneaking a peak at another woman. The potential for jealousy follows closely on the heels of attraction in any romantic relationship. Another point made here is that even in the midst of her feminist explanation of a birthing ritual, Celine is not immune to the lure of male attention. *We* notice Celine making eye contact with the two men because the

camera views the act from behind her and at a distance. Although we cannot hear what they say, the two men appear to be discussing Celine's attributes after she and Jesse walk by. Perhaps they're commenting on her "nice ass" a little more discretely than the four men who commented out loud about Jesse's former girlfriend.

Viewed from a new camera position far removed from Celine's two anonymous admirers and the belly dancer, the conversation continues. But as Jesse begins a story complementary to Celine's, she briefly glances behind her. At her two male admirers? Is she offended? Tempted to tell them, as did Jesse's former girlfriend, "Go fuck yourselves, dickheads"? Or is she flattered by their attention? Attracted to one or both of them? We'll never know. And she certainly isn't going to tell Jesse, who obliviously rambles on about an old man who watched a group of young people dancing and remarked, "They're trying to shake off their genitals and become angels." That's not what Jesse was doing in the previous scene, nor Celine in this one.

Celine is amused by Jesse's old man story, but less so when Jesse returns to the subject of their earlier gender debate. He notes the complete absence of men in her description of the birthing ritual. "You don't need us?" he complains. Celine takes the bait, insisting that men are lucky women don't behead them after mating, the way some spiders do. So Jesse's biological argument in favor of unrestricted sex returns as Celine's argument for eradicating troublesome males after sex. Monkeys have become spiders. "We at least let you live. What are you complaining about?" Celine adds without sympathy while looking away from Jesse. He scolds her. "You're officially kidding. But there's something to that. You keep bringing stuff like that up." They're on the verge of another, potentially serious argument. But Celine, benefitting from their prior experiences this evening, pre-empts it.

Strolling through a narrow alley, with no one else around to distract them, Celine and Jesse settle into a frank discussion about their hopes, dreams and fears with regard to love. She stops and touches the sleeve of his jacket, signaling she's trying to be serious, not flippant or antagonistic. She admits to being conflicted between her feminist ideals and her desire for the love of a man. Another touch of Jesse's sleeve, and another brief stop, emphasizes the importance of what she's trying to tell him.

Broadening her argument to include everyone, men and women, she concludes, "But isn't everything we do in life a way to be loved?" Jesse's responds with equal honesty. Like Celine touching his coat sleeve, he gestures for them to sit down together on a nearby stack of wooden pallets, halting their stroll in order for him to make an important statement. Jesse too admits to being torn, between dreams of being a good husband and father and a competing desire to accomplish something of broader, social importance. Love versus career is equivalent to Celine's conflict of independence versus love. This is a remarkably candid, non-defensive discussion between a man and a woman on the verge of either splitting up or making some sort of commitment to each other. The quiet passion of their mutual confessions is expressed in close-ups of their faces, and perfectly complemented by the quiet seclusion of their surroundings.

Celine answers Jesse's doubts (not "retaliates against" them, as she did moments earlier with her spider comment) by telling him about an old man for whom she once worked. That man placed his career ahead of love and family. Late in life he lamented to her that he felt "his life was for no one and nothing." Celine extrapolates a general principal from the old man's example, and in doing so sums up much of what *Before Sunrise* is about. "I believe if there is any kind of god, it wouldn't be in any of us. Not you or me. But just [pointing to Jesse and

herself] this little space in between.” A space that is difficult to bridge, especially over a long period of time, as *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight* will dramatize.

Jesse gazes at Celine with undisguised affection. She re-states her point in different terms. “If there’s any kind of magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something.” With a shrug she admits the near impossibility of success. But “the answer must be in the attempt.”

Jesse smiles at her. For once he doesn’t feel the need to respond, facetiously or otherwise. His silence and smile signal agreement. The scene’s final image is a long shot, nearly a still-life of these two characters, so recently strangers to one another, now enjoying a quiet moment of intimacy in a deserted alley far from either’s home. They look at each other and smile. For a moment they achieve near-perfect harmony. Hopefully it’s a moment to linger in their memories, regardless of what happens from this point forward. But it is *just* a moment. They break eye contact at the end of the scene, possibly out of unspoken sadness at the fast-approaching moment of their scheduled separation.

Jesse and Celine’s next stop is another restaurant, this time inside rather than at an outside table. The camera surveys restaurant employees and patrons before returning us to the main characters. A bartender smokes a cigarette behind the counter as he listlessly goes about his job. Maybe Jesse was right about Europeans not being service oriented. Then again, this is *one* waiter in *one* restaurant, and it’s very late at night. Maybe he’s had a long workday.

Each table in the restaurant is a world unto itself. And each time we shift attention from one to another, we see other tables and patrons in the background, including some we just visited. They really do seem a world away from each other. At the first table one man dominates conversation

with four companions, one of whom tries to interrupt, unsuccessfully. The blabbermouth seems to think the woman who interrupted is being rude. But their dialog is in German. And I *am* the dumb American when it comes to languages other than English.

At another table two men play a card game while talking. Two bearded men occupy a third table. They appear to be discussing an abstract, academic topic. One of them speaks in a slow, deliberate manner. It's a very civilized, emotionally detached exchange of ideas.

A young woman sits alone at the fourth table, reading a book. Maybe she's a student studying for an upcoming exam. Nearby a young couple with American accents comment on the restaurant's service, or lack thereof. The man is annoyed, interpreting a waitress's tardiness as a clear indication that Austrian culture is in decline. "In New York this person would be out of a job." His companion, playing with her food, seems more annoyed with *him* than with the state of European customer service. The man's complaint echoes but far outstrips Jesse's comparatively mild remark back in the lounge car. He and Celine have survived their little culture clashes so far. Whether or not *this* couple can do so will remain a mystery. We don't stick around long enough to find out.

At a sixth table two men and a woman enjoy convivial conversation. They seem very comfortable, like long-time customers of the restaurant. They laugh heartily, unconcerned about customer service. Maybe they're joking about the whiny tourist at the previous table. More likely they're as oblivious of him as he is of them. The few feet of space between their tables could just as well be a thousand miles.

Finally we join Jesse and Celine, seated across from one another in a cozy booth. *Their* dialog has advanced a great deal since Jesse's little dig about poor European customer service many

hours ago. We catch up with them at the start of a little game proposed by Celine. Like Jesse's Q and A game at the start of their Vienna adventure, hers is designed to broach topics they might be reluctant to discuss in a more straightforward manner. The game involves a bit of theatrical make-believe in which Celine pretends to phone her best friend in Paris to explain her delayed return and discuss the unusual events of her night in Vienna. Jesse is a little slow to adopt his assigned role as her best friend, but finally catches on and answers Celine's "ring ring." Both characters hold a thumb and little finger to their ear and mouth, pretending it's a telephone. This little artifice serves the same function as the pinball machine in the nightclub scene, facilitating conversation by making it seem a little less direct.

Celine greets her surrogate friend in their native French. Jesse awkwardly replies in kind. But when she continues the conversation in French, he cleverly ad-libs an excuse to switch to the language ~~X~~ he understands better: the "friend" wants to practice her English skills. It's another, in this case harmless reminder of their cultural differences and of the fact that Celine must accommodate Jesse in order for them to communicate verbally.

Celine tells her "friend" she got off the train in Vienna with a guy she just met. Jesse warms to his role, playing the cautionary confidante. "Are you crazy?" He inquires *why* she got off the train with a stranger. But of course it's really Jesse, not Celine's "friend," who wants to know. He's curious about what she thought and currently thinks of him. She tells him exactly what he wants to hear: that she was ready to disembark with him even before he asked her to do so. "He was so sweet, I couldn't help it." Going even further she admits she "fell" for Jesse when he told her the story about seeing his great grandmother's ghost when he was a boy. Obviously it was more effective, if unwittingly so, than his monkey sex story.

Jesse absorbs this information with his mouth half-open, enraptured. Celine re-phrases her description of the event to reduce the sentiment, but in good humor rather than as a retraction. "He trapped me." She follows with a physical description of Jesse, obviously more comfortable doing so through the fictional filter of talking to an old friend. Her description starts out very flattering, until she mentions his "greasy hair." Jesse cringes. But she softens the blow with "I love it." "Tall" and "a little clumsy" are added to the mix. The latter isn't really criticism. It's just part of her sweet and sour flirtation. As is describing his kissing style as "adolescent," but also "cute." Jesse pretends to protest, but not really. Nothing Celine says in this scene wounds his pride. All of it is music to his ears.

Celine confesses that she likes Jesse more and more as the night goes on. But would that have been her opinion at the end of their palm reader dispute, or just before they encountered the poet? I doubt it. For now things are going well between them. After confessing her thoughts and feelings about Jesse, Celine solicits the same reassurance from him regarding his thoughts and feelings about *her*. She's worried he might be afraid of her after she told him about her short story in which a woman kills her boyfriend. "The only person I could really hurt is myself," she says, pleading her case before Judge Jesse.

Jesse supplies what Celine needs, in the guise of her best friend's advice. "I think he's crazy about you" is *his* confession, made easier by the fictional filter he and Celine have invented. "Are you going to see him again?" he inquires. Jesse and Celine are providing each other with mutual assessments and soliciting future promises. Celine's reply is noncommittal. A moment of awkward silence follows. The big question about their future together hangs between them. Neither is ready to offer a firm commitment, thus making him or herself emotionally vulnerable

to the other. Yet the sheer inventiveness of their conversational artifice in this scene is exhilarating to witness. They've created a new platform for intimacy.

Celine breaks the tension of uncertainty about their future by reversing their roles for Act II of this private drama. It's Jesse's turn to phone his buddy Frank, back in the States. Celine plays her role to the hilt. "Hi dude. What's up" she says in exaggerated American guy talk. It's about as convincing as Jesse's lame attempt to speak French.

Jesse rehashes his Madrid fiasco, concluding that long distance relationships are doomed to failure. He's talking about his former girlfriend, but the same thought will haunt the resolution of his relationship with Celine as well. He tells "Frank" that he didn't return home right away after the breakup because he didn't want to encounter anybody familiar. "I just wanted to be a ghost, completely anonymous" reveals more of the pain he suffered than have any of his previous remarks in the movie thus far. The artificial mode of Jesse and Celine's conversation in this scene allows him to open up to her in new ways.

With a worried expression on her face, and speaking in her own voice rather than fake Frank's, Celine asks if Jesse is feeling okay *now*. She's worried that he hasn't recovered from his feelings for Lisa. But her concern is unfounded. Jesse is better than okay. He's "rapturous," thanks to the "Botticelli angel" he met on the train to Vienna. Romantic hyperbole it may be, but it's effective, and certainly made easier for him because he's pretending to speak to an old buddy rather than to the "angel" herself. Celine smiles and looks away, both pleased and embarrassed. Score one for Cupid's arrow. And Jesse even employed a *European* metaphor to compliment her, which is a nice touch. Of course none of their disagreements from earlier in the evening are acknowledged in their present conversation.

Celine fished for reassurance from Jesse regarding the short story she worried might have frightened him. Jesse now fishes for the same from her. "She didn't like me much at first" he tells "Frank," contrasting his own shortcomings with Celine's intelligence, passion and beauty. He felt unsure of himself and stupid in her presence. We observed no hint that she disliked him when they first met. Yet Jesse wants to be *told* that she didn't, just like Celine wanted to be told by him that he doesn't think she's crazy. She obliges. In the guise of Jesse's old buddy, Celine points out it was no accident she sat next to him on the train. Her attraction to him was immediate. She follows with a more general comment about how stupid men can be about women, hinting at gender politics that divided them earlier. But she also admits, by way of balancing the criticism, that women too act strangely at times. "The little I know of them," she adds, still pretending to speak as Jesse's male buddy. Jesse, almost forgetting he's supposed to be talking over the phone, obligingly agrees.

There is less emotional defensiveness in these two characters in this than in previous scenes, unless the fiction of a phone conversation with best friends is in itself considered a defensive act. In the course of their short acquaintance they have agreed, disagreed, argued, made up, gotten a little bored with each other and renewed their mutual passion. By the time they reach the restaurant their trust in each other is implicit. Throughout their pretend phone conversation we catch glimpses of other patrons whom we met close-up earlier. The conversations of those other patrons no longer audible, they seem a million miles away now, irrelevant to what transpires between Celine and Jesse except as reminders of the gap between strangers our couple overcame in order to get acquainted in the first place.

Later, on a stone balcony overlooking a Viennese street, surrounded by the glow of city lights,

Jesse and Celine pause to reflect on their evening together. “Dream world” and “our own creation” come to mind, both being optimistic descriptions of their experience. That their acquaintance “shouldn’t officially be happening,” according to Jesse, makes it feel “other-worldly” to Celine, until she applies a dose of fairy tale reality to their magic. “But then the morning comes and we turn into pumpkins, right?” Yet by turning her statement into a question (“right?”) she leaves the door open for the magic to continue. “At this time I think you’re supposed to pull out the glass slipper and see if it fits.” She’s asking, in effect, if she can play Cinderella to Jesse’s Prince Charming. “It’ll fit” he assures her. They kiss.

This short scene consists of a single, stationary camera shot that allows us to see both the characters and the background scenery in sharp focus. That scenery consists of two large buildings with a broad street between them. The buildings are well-lit but no people other than our couple can be seen. A traffic light blinks for no discernible traffic. Thanks to a reflection in a window on the opposite side of the camera frame, that blinking light appears on both sides of the characters, highlighting their magical isolation from the rest of the world yet also lending the scene a vague feeling of desolation. Jesse and Celine look out over the pretty desolation, silently pondering their impending, presumably permanent separation.

Their next stop is a floating cafe on the Danube River,. The vessel is still brightly illuminated as it serves a few late-night customers. Jesse and Celine are seated at a table. A single candle floats precariously in a glass of water between them. It’s romantic, but also a fitting metaphor for their precarious romance, which is scheduled to flicker out soon.

Jesse talks about a friend of his’ who witnessed the birth of his own son. Earlier, in the cathedral, Jesse introduced the subject of weddings, virtually enacting the culmination of a

Quaker wedding with Celine. Now he's talking about babies, and not for the purpose of soliciting sex. Is he indirectly hinting at the possibility of a future together with Celine?

Sounding her out on the notion of extending their time together? If that's his intention, he does so with a major twist. The new father, watching his child take its first breath, can't help thinking he's looking at something that will inevitably die some day. That's not the conventional version of a new parent's first impression of his child. Is Jesse trying to prepare himself emotionally for the end of his brief relationship with Celine?

Celine is puzzled. Does she think he's being morbid? But Jesse's point isn't as grim as it first appears. The lesson he derives from his friend's experience is that the finite quality of life can give added value to "our time and specific moment." It's a lofty, abstract idea, typically Jesse. Celine brings that idea down to earth and applies it to their personal situation. But she's nervous about doing so, guardedly bringing her hands up to her face. "After tomorrow morning we're probably never going to see each other again, right?" "Another observation turned into a question. It's her turn to sound out Jesse about their possible future together, or lack thereof.

Surprised at Celine's pessimism, which was really more a hopeful question than a negative assertion, Jesse lobs the question back to her without answering it. Doesn't she think they'll ever get together again? Celine lobs it right back. "What do you think?" They're passing a hot potato back and forth, neither willing to risk making a first commitment, which was the same impasse they encountered two scenes ago, at the restaurant. Who will knock down the barrier between them and openly admit he or she wants to maintain contact with the other after their Vienna diversion ends? Glancing from side to side, Jesse hems and haws about it, announcing hesitantly that he wasn't planning another European trip.

Seeing Jesse equivocate, Celine jumps in with an even bigger hedge. Pointing out the great distance between their respective homes, she “totally understand[s]” why it would be inconvenient for him to return. In other words she places the burden of terminating their relationship squarely on Jesse, who promptly returns the favor. “I’d hate to make you fly. You hate to fly, right?” He uses her own confession, from back in the lounge car, against her. They’re trying to outflank each other to avoid making the first proposal to extend their romance, perhaps because they’ve both recently experienced the pain of being dumped.

Celine jumps over Jesse’s hurdle, which he disguised as a concern for her peace of mind. “I’m not so scared of flying.” It’s not a convincing performance. She *is* afraid of flying, as she once admitted. Jesse looks and sounds equally unsure, glancing around nervously and tugging on his ear while tentatively offering to make a return trip to Europe.

Implicitly acknowledging the awkwardness of their evasive maneuvering, Celine mercifully calls a halt to it, suggesting they be “rational adults” about the matter. Maybe it won’t be so bad if tonight is their only time together. But Jesse is as reluctant to end their acquaintance as he was to extend it. Before he can formulate a response, Celine paints a grimly hypothetical picture of two people exchanging addresses and phone numbers, then not following through on a mutual promise to stay in touch. And she’s got the memory of Jean-Marc Fleury to validate her pessimism. Jesse, possibly thinking of his failed long-distance relationship with Lisa from Madrid, agrees. Celine echoes him, “I hate that too,” but in a quietly sad voice very different from her confidently rational voice a moment ago. She’s disappointed. She wanted Jesse to protest against her rationalism, just as he seemed to want to figure out a way for them to get together again, until she suggested it wouldn’t be so bad if they didn’t. Both characters

unwittingly talk each other out of extending their one-night acquaintance.

Building on Celine's pessimism to make a general statement about love, Jesse questions the popular sentiment that romantic relationships are supposed to last forever. Celine half-heartedly pretends to agree. Surprisingly Jesse then backtracks, perhaps hoping that Celine will do the same. "But you think tonight's it, huh?" He clarifies, because this is an important moment for them. "I mean that tonight's our only night?" Celine reacts to his question as though it was a statement of fact instead of an invitation to disagree. After the bitter lesson she learned from her previous lover, who complained that she loved him too much, she doesn't want to pressure Jesse into a commitment she fears he doesn't really want to make. "It's the only way, no?" Again, affirmation and doubt, statement and question mix in the same line of dialog. But her eyes betray disappointment. She wants Jesse to reply "No."

Big close-ups of the two characters increase the drama of this ambiguous exchange. As does their inclination to place their hands near their mouths as they wait, with baited breath so to speak, for the *other* person to decide their fate. Pausing after Celine's pessimistic response to his pessimistic query, Jesse proposes a stoical bargain. "Well all right. Let's do it. No delusions. No projections." The latter refers, consciously or not, to his remark back at the amusement park, about people making false romantic projections of each other. "We'll just make tonight great."

Celine places her hands back on the table, smiles broadly as though relieved and agrees to Jesse's proposal. But in the background we hear the first notes of "Vienna Blood," the famous Johann Strauss waltz, performed on violin and accordion. Distracted from their own romantic negotiations for a moment, Jesse and Celine turn to watch the musicians serenade two middle-aged couples sitting at another table. Assuming they *are* couples, their age is a reminder of

relationships that can endure beyond one glorious evening. Whether by way of a waltz or a tango, the three *Before* movies are always about the *dance* of love.

Smiling, Celine glances at Jesse. Then she remembers their bargain and looks down despondently. Jesse looks away, then quickly tries to distract them both from the painfully romantic music. He suggests a formal handshake to commemorate their “one and only night together, and the hours that remain.” That handshake is more a passionate hand *clasp*, over which Jesse performs a mumbo-jumbo gesture evoking some fake magic. Many things they say and do now refer back to their own brief but surprisingly rich conversational history. Jesse doesn’t believe in the supernatural. Celine may or may not. But at the moment he *wants* to believe that a silly gesture can guarantee the emotional efficacy of their rational agreement. In fact he merely delays rather than eliminates the moment of truth they must soon face.

Celine is both touched and saddened by his effort. She admits being depressed by having to say goodbye in the morning. Jesse has a solution for that too. They will say goodbye now, thus avoiding the pain later. It’s a specious game of pretend, an emotional sleight-of-hand, like making a wish after blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. Yet it lightens Celine’s mood. He’s pretty good at doing that. Until her attention returns to the Strauss waltz and the promise of love it conveys for someone else. She wants more from this night. Their hands unclasp. Jesse, looking at Celine while her back is turned, rests his chin on his hand and ponders his short future with her. Neither character is satisfied with their “rational” bargain, nor has much confidence in their pre-emptive farewell.

From older, romantic Vienna, Jesse and Celine move into a more modern part of the city. In the vicinity of a music store called *Europafunk*, which looks nothing like the “Alt und Neu” they

visited earlier, they descend to a cellar bar, down a stairway lit in vibrant red. No longer brooding about their impending separation, they try to live life to the fullest in the little time they have together, conspiring to make off with a bottle of wine and a pair of wine glasses without paying for either. Contemporary pop music washes away the bittersweet lyricism of "Vienna Blood." For the moment their pre-emptive "Goodbye" seems to be working.

Jesse "James" and Celine "Bonnie" Parker take their appointed places for the big heist. Jesse distracts the bartender while Celine moves to a table where some wine glasses used by previous customers have not yet been cleared. This time a not-so-dumb Jesse cleverly negotiates for a free bottle of wine. Luckily for him the bartender speaks English and possesses a generous sentimental streak.

Surprisingly, the story Jesse feeds the bartender is essentially the truth. Tonight is his and Celine's only night together. She wants a bottle of red wine. He has no money. So in exchange for the wine he promises to mail payment to the bartender after returning home to the States. Celine bides her time between glances from the bartender, who after a moment of doubt agrees to Jesse's dubious offer. A handshake seals the deal, as it did previously between Jesse and Celine.

When the bartender turns his back to fetch the wine, Celine slips two glasses into her bag. The bartender returns with a bottle and hands it to Jesse, telling him, "For the greatest night of your life." What a nice guy. One would like to think Jesse will make good on his promise of payment. But he and Celine are experiencing the intimate pleasure of conspiring in a slightly dangerous enterprise. That's a bonding experience. Us against the world! Like their earlier commentaries on the two monks and the palm reader, before the latter upset their private little paradise. They

probably won't remember to compensate the kindness of this particular stranger.

The camera lingers on the bartender after Jesse departs. He gazes at the off-screen couple, perhaps a little envious of their youthful, romantic enthusiasm. Or maybe he's remembering a time in his life when he experienced a similar thrill.

The bar scene began with a shot of two city trains moving parallel to each other and at nearly the same speed, but on separate sets of tracks that will inevitably part, sending each train in a different direction. It's a nifty visual echo of our couple in the waning hours of their brief time together. And a reminder of the film's *first* metaphor, featuring separate sets of train tracks merging.

A city park, with green, manicured lawns and a canopy of tree branches is a perfectly secluded setting for two desperate criminals to enjoy their stolen loot. Celine and Jesse lie sprawled on the grass, side by side, drinking the wine he conned out of the bartender, in glasses she stole from the bar. A subjective camera shot lets us share their view of a full moon overhead.

The camera reverses angle to show Celine and Jesse staring up at the moon. Celine reveals that she's had "special moments" like this one before, but something was always lacking. She wished she'd been with someone else. "But I'm happy to be with you" is her assertion that she's with the *right* person at last. And there's more. Looking directly at Jesse, she adds, "You couldn't possibly know why a night like this is so important to my life right now. But it is," the implication being that she's experienced too much disappointment lately. Was it over her breakup six months earlier, or is there more to her story than either we or Jesse know about? "This is a great morning" she quietly exults.

Jesse remains respectfully silent while Celine speaks. When she stops, he agrees with her that

it's a great morning, then provocatively adds, "Do you think we'll have others?" Is he reacting to her hint that he's the right guy for her? He's certainly violating their prior agreement about this being their one and only night together. She laughs and reminds them of that bargain. He looks away. Does he feel rebuffed? Was his question a too-subtle offer to renege on their bargain? Does he misread her response? He changes the subject, backtracking to Celine's previous point about experiencing special moments in life with the wrong person. In Jesse's case, the wrong person was himself.

Propping himself on his elbow and facing Celine, getting serious for a moment, Jesse explains in detail something to which he has obviously given much thought. And it's a much more intimate topic for him than were his cable television idea, reincarnation, simian sex or the wasting of precious time supplied by labor-saving technology. To sum up his new topic, Jesse is sick and tired of himself, including the "stupid" jokes he habitually makes. Then he applies that self-disgust to any hypothetical future he and Celine might share. He predicts she would soon tire of his mannerisms, including his insecurities and predilection for telling the same "pseudo-intellectual stories" again and again. He rolls over on his back, breaking eye contact with Celine, but only for a moment. Like Celine's admission of being with the wrong person during special moments in her life, until now, Jesse's sad tale too has a happy ending. "Being with you, it's made me feel like I was somebody else."

Celine's reluctance to get romantically involved again after past disappointments seems rooted in a fear of being with the wrong person, of letting herself become vulnerable to a guy who is incapable of loving her with the same intensity. Jesse's reluctance, on the other hand, stems from serious doubts about his own self-worth. Maybe Celine's recent, bitter breakup has shaken her

faith is *all* men. And Jesse's unhappy experience with a father who didn't really want him and more recently with a girlfriend who dumped him has made him gun-shy of *any* emotional attachment.

Jesse looks directly at Celine while telling her how good being with her makes him feel about himself. Then he looks away from her while equating that pleasant feeling of losing himself with the equivalent experiences of dancing and taking drugs. Shockingly, Celine adds "fucking" to that list. Astounded, Jesse agrees. He looks at her again, as though contemplating a response to her comment, while she continues to gaze up at the sky. Several scenes ago he tried to persuade her to have sex with him, and failed miserably. Is he thinking of a second attempt? After all, *she* brought up the topic this time. But he thinks better of it and silently returns his gaze to the sky. And perhaps because he *didn't* jump at the prospect of sex this time, like some horny monkey, Celine turns to him and warmly asks to be kissed.

It's a lengthy, passionate kiss. Aroused, Jesse gets exploratory with his hands. Celine stops him, reluctantly rather than because she's offended, apologizing about her "stupid" reason for doing so. Jesse is all patience and understanding as she explains. Celine wants to make love with him, but since they're parting forever in a few hours she doesn't feel right about it. She'll miss him and wonder whom he's with. Love and jealousy go hand in hand. Even more apologetically, Celine admits it might be a "female thing."

Jesse impulsively proposes they see each other again. What he should have said much earlier, what *both* of them should have said at the indoor and boat restaurants, now sounds suspiciously like a cynical maneuver for sex, no better than Jesse's monkey story. And that's how Celine reacts to it. Rolling her eyes and looking away from him, with a hint of acid in her voice, she

tells him she doesn't want him to break his vow just so he can "get laid." Jesse pursues his argument, but is neither subtle nor compelling.

Celine shoots him down, at first with good humor and then more forcefully. She doesn't want to be just a "great story" for Jesse to tell his buddies back in the States. She doesn't want their one great night together to be reduced to something so cheap. What a difference there is between this moment and the conversation they had back at the indoor restaurant. These two characters almost slide back into the old, unwinnable gender debate they fought earlier. But this time Jesse prudently backs off, withdrawing his suggestion.

In the awkward aftermath of their brief impasse, Jesse and Celine avoid looking at each other. Their silence is broken by Celine, who looks at him and inquires plaintively, "You don't want to see me again?" Jesse's momentary backslide into what she sees as predictable male selfishness has for Celine called into question everything she thought they shared this evening. Jesse returns her gaze and laughingly reassures her of the opposite. Positioning his face very close to hers, he tells her seriously that if his choice were either to never see her again or to marry her, he would choose the latter. "Maybe that's a lot of romantic bullshit. But people have gotten married for a lot less." No argument there.

They stare at each other. Is Jesse waiting for an official response? Was his proposal of marriage more than hypothetical? Celine, caressing his head with her hand, responds in a surprising way. His reassurance has freed her, from suspicion, to be sexual. Well, almost. She reveals that she wanted to have sex with him even before they got off the train. If true, how ironic that the intervening hours they've spent getting to know each other have now made her uncertain about sex. Jesse lowers his head in an exaggerated expression of disappointment. How

could he have known he was so *close* to one of his goals? And now, apparently, so far away.

Celine laughs, consoles, then kisses Jesse. She ponders out loud why she makes everything so complicated. He responds with a cautious "I don't know," careful not to rock the boat. He's clueless how to proceed. A moment later, at Celine's initiative, they're in each other's arms, kissing, entwining and eagerly exploring each other with their hands. Celine is on top first, then Jesse, then Celine again. Then they're side-by-side. No more soul-searching angst. No more debate. The scene ends with the camera returning to its original position, looking up at the trees overhead. But it is no longer subjective from the characters' point of view.

We jump to the following morning. Blue sky, fleecy clouds. chirping birds and a dog barking in the distance remind us of realities outside Celine and Jesse's private world. We don't return to them lying on the ground. Did they have sex? Did they stop short of it? Each member of the audience gets to fill in that particular blank according to his or her inclinations. *Before Sunset*, the sequel to *Before Sunrise*, provides one answer. But not a definitive answer, because *Before Sunset* plays, to its credit, more like a speculation on what *might* have happened to our couple during and after the end of *Before Sunrise*. My own interpretation of the park scene is that Jesse and Celine probably did make love there. Their passion for each other had been building for some time. And the following morning they both look *very* relaxed. Or are they just *tired*? It's been a long night for them.

The soft, distant sound of a harpsichord transitions us into the next scene, which takes place in a narrow, deserted Viennese side street, early in the morning. Jesse and Celine, viewed initially from far away, stroll towards the camera, which rises at the same leisurely pace to meet them.

Jesse inquires what Celine will do first when she gets back to Paris. By bringing up the subject

of her post-separation plans, he expresses interest in her life beyond the terms of their rational bargain. He can't help it, and neither can she. Telling him she'll probably phone her parents, Celine asks Jesse the same question. He plans to pick up his dog from a friend's place. "You have a dog?" she asks, revealing just how little these two characters know about each other's lives outside the bubble of Vienna. They've learned intimate details about parents, former lovers, hopes, fears and beliefs, but nothing about so mundane a fact as one of them having a pet.

Celine declares her love for dogs, which is good to know about the prospective girlfriend of a dog owner. As it would be if she disliked or were allergic to dogs. Under normal we'll-meet-again circumstances, this little exchange of information would be a welcome notch in the compatibility column. But these are not normal circumstances. Groaning at that realization, Jesse complains "We're back in real time." "I hate that" echoes Celine.

Johann Sebastian Bach's 25th *Goldberg Variation* complements and enhances the tranquility of a beautiful setting, but also conveys something of the sad reality closing in on Celine and Jesse. Yet because that same music is heard by them, it also serves to distract them from their sadness. Peering through the open, grated window of a cellar apartment, they discretely spy on a musician performing the music on his harpsichord.

Jesse pulls Celine to him and they slowly dance to the ancient yet compelling music. He stops, holds her by the shoulders at arm's length and announces he's going to take a mental picture of her, "so I never forget you, or all this." Celine does likewise, for the same reason. They gaze at each other for a moment. Then, in an almost courtly manner, Jesse leans towards her for a kiss, which in turn becomes a passionate, wordless embrace, which then segues into a wordless resumption of their stroll, hand-in-hand, through this obscure little back street in Vienna. No

museum could have provided a more romantic setting for this brief interlude.

The camera cuts to a broader view, allowing the characters to pass out of sight and us to briefly ponder the deserted street without them. It's a nondescript place. No monumental buildings. No historical landmarks. No human activity, Nothing but the magic of Bach played on harpsichord and the recent memory of two lovers, unnoticed by the world at large, taking mental pictures in a desperate attempt to hold on to each other in their memories. That's what transforms an otherwise ordinary setting into a memorable one.

Back to monumental Vienna. Celine and Jesse rest together at the base of a huge statue. Linklater never shows the statue in its entirety, reminding us its significance in his film is only what the main characters do and say beneath it. From a distance they too appear small and insignificant. By historical reckoning they are. Celine lies with her head in Jesse's lap. The hour is still early. There is little human activity around them. It's almost as if they have the city all to themselves, for a little while longer.

"The years shall run like rabbits," says Jesse. Roused from near-sleep, Celine asks "What?" "Nothing" Jesse answers. But those words have meaning for him, as his follow-up explanation reveals. He was quoting from a recording he owns of Dylan Thomas reading a W. H. Auden poem entitled "As I Walked Out One Evening." In his best attempt at a British accent, and viewed from a very low camera angle that lends him a monumental aspect, like the base of the statue behind him, Jesse reads more from the poem. The gist of his recitation is that no one can conquer Time. All things must pass. Which is a more formal way of repeating what Jesse said in the previous scene: "We're back in real time."

Celine conquers her sleepiness sufficiently to answer Jesse's somber observation. But she

doesn't do so with a poem. Instead she backtracks to challenge a cynical point Jesse made hours earlier, as they lay on the grass together in the middle of a deserted park. Was she pondering that point, with her eyes closed, while Jesse pondered Dylan Thomas reading Auden? Even while holding each other they remain individuals, each pursuing his or her private thread of thought and feeling.

Celine insists she would not grow tired of a lover whose habits and mannerisms she grew to know well. On the contrary, she believes the more she knows about a man the more deeply she could love him. And to support her claim she supplies hypothetical details, including one directly from Jesse's pessimistic example in that earlier scene. "Knowing what kind of story he'd tell in a given situation." Would that include even a "stupid, pseudo-intellectual story" he's told time and again? It's a brave assertion by Celine. Can she back it up? Maybe the answer to that question will come two decades later, in *Before Midnight*. But in the present scene her assertion indirectly defies Jesse's point about the inevitably corrosive influence of Time.

Jesse doesn't answer. Maybe he should. Celine, refuting both Auden and Thomas, is perhaps extending Jesse an invitation to a future together. They stare fondly at each other. She reaches up to gently stroke his hair and neck, which he thoroughly enjoys. But instead of taking up Celine's wishful challenge, Jesse too backtracks to their conversational past, all the way back to the bridge outside the train station, to distract their attention from the here and now. He points out they forgot to attend the play about the cow. They laugh at the recollection. It seems like a million years ago they spoke with the two Viennese men who were also amateur actors. After experiencing so much in the short time they've been together, Jesse and Celine seem like a much older couple remembering an amusing incident that happened years ago. But the laughter fades.

They stare at each other. Soon they won't be making any more memories together.

Weary, Celine closes her eyes, her head still resting securely in Jesse's lap, his comforting arm lying across her stomach. But then her eyes open again. She looks to the side and away from him. Jesse looks up and away from her. Though physically connected, they separately contemplate their futures without each other.

They return to the train station where their Vienna adventure began. Jesse carries Celine's bag as they walk along the platform to her train, as he did when they left the original train so long ago. Viewed from behind, by a camera close to the ground, they walk in step with each other. Viewed from the front, Celine, holding on to Jesse's hand, casts an anxious glance in his direction. When he returns that glance, she averts her gaze. They're still playing cat and mouse, each waiting for a last minute reprieve from the other. Avoiding the topic of urgent interest to both, she instructs him to be sure to get on the right bus for the airport, showing concern for him within the strict limits of their rational bargain. They reach the steps to her train. Jesse is flustered. The inevitable moment of parting has arrived, too soon.

They face each other. The normally talkative Jesse is stuck for something adequate to say. Celine offers "I guess this is it, no?" As she's done so many times, she combines a statement with a question, the latter contradicting the former. Jesse again fumbles for the right words. A bell announcing the train's imminent departure puts additional pressure on them. "I really . . . I mean . . . You know," is all Jesse can get out. "Yeah, I know. Me too," she echoes. Their gestures, including an awkward hug, are as inarticulate as their dialog. And they both know it.

Finally, pressed by a public announcement that the train is about to leave the station, Celine resigns herself to the inevitable. She wishes Jesse a great life and fun in everything he does.

Jesse, his tongue-tied voice freed by Celine's lead, responds in kind, wishing her good luck at school. But their dialog is wholly inadequate to the situation, which Jesse acknowledges by adding, "I hate this." She reciprocates. They exchange a final, desperate kiss, clinging to each other. The camera cuts to big close-ups as Jesse, at the last possible moment, breaks their rational bargain and declares he wants to see her again. She admits the same. They waste precious time asking each other why neither said anything earlier, until Jesse re-focuses their attention on their immediate dilemma.

They strike a new bargain. Celine suggests they meet in Vienna again in five years. That's much too long for Jesse, so they reduce the gap to one year, then six months. Celine raises an objection. "It's going to be freezing." No problem, he insists. They'll meet in Vienna, then travel somewhere else. In a rush they refine the terms of their new bargain. Six months from last night, December 16th, on Track Nine, at six o'clock in the evening, they will re-unite. All the defensive evasion of their previous negotiations on this topic evaporates in the passion of this moment.

Placing an additional burden of responsibility on Celine, Jesse reminds her that he'll have to travel much further than she will to rendezvous on December 16th. Beaming with joy, she promises to fulfill her part of the deal. Then she adds, tentatively, "And we're not going to call or write?" She seems to be hinting they *should* remain in contact while apart, which would fly in the face of previous, unhappy experiences they've both had: Celine with Jean-Marc and Jesse with Lisa. It would also violate their glib critique of long-distance relationships. Jesse replies confidently, "No. It's depressing." So, wary of repeating past mistakes, they retain a small clause from their original bargain. But by doing so they render their new understanding more susceptible to accident. And it is out of that potential for error that the story of *Before Sunset*, a

sequel probably not envisioned when this scene was filmed, is constructed.

A quick farewell kiss is not nearly as desperate or clingy as the previous one. Jesse seals their new agreement the same way he sealed their old one, confident now that the new one assures their future together. "Say goodbye" he instructs Celine. She obeys, but with sadness in her voice and on her face. "Goodbye" he replies, with a bold smile. "Au revoir" she adds, in her native language. "Later" he reciprocates in his. For a moment their cultural differences enhance rather than diminish their romantic connection.

Celine and Jesse kiss once more: sort of halfway between their first, desperate embrace and their second, brief, confident kiss. The time has come. Jesse hands Celine her bags. She runs up the steps and disappears into the train car. Alone again, as he was at the start of the movie, he walks along the outside of the car, searching for Celine through the windows, his hand trailing along the train's lifeless metallic side, reluctant to break physical contact with her.

In the background another young couple kisses goodbye. The man enters the train while the woman remains on the platform. What's *their* story? Is this a casual or painful parting? The woman leans against the train car and peers through a window, searching for her boyfriend, lover or husband. Not much different from Jesse's reaction to Celine's departure. Jesse walks past the unidentified woman. Each is oblivious of the other, and to the probability they have much in common at this moment.

The melancholy Andante from a Sonata for Viola da Gamba by J. S. Bach seeps onto the soundtrack, echoing the sadness of our couple, and perhaps that of the anonymous couple too. Inside the train we watch Celine approach through a corridor as the train begins to move. She enters an unoccupied, semi-private compartment on the left side of the camera frame. This

repeats an action we saw at the start of the movie. But in that earlier scene we did not follow the anonymous woman into her compartment. We learned nothing of her prior or subsequent life. We *do* follow Celine into *her* compartment, with keen interest. She sits down and gazes absently out the window, not searching for Jesse because the window faces away from the platform. If we hadn't spent the evening with Celine we would have no idea what's on her mind. Her thoughts and feelings are now private, hidden behind a mask of not so much indifference as defensive stoicism. The background music speaks for her.

Inside the train terminal Jesse walks slowly towards the camera, carrying the bag he retrieved from the locker where it was stored with Celine's. Other people pass by him, going to and fro according to their own schedules, as unaware of the details of his life as he is of theirs. Like Celine's, Jesse's face betrays little of what he's feeling. But the wipe of a hand across his mouth, a backward glance in the direction of Celine's departed train, and the background music tell *us* plenty. Without each other the world is curiously desolate for both characters, at least in the immediate aftermath of their parting.

We take our leave of both main characters. The melancholy music continues through a montage of shots re-visiting their old Viennese haunts. "Old" may seem a premature description. But in the absence of Celine and Jesse, every location to which we return seems emptied of its meaning. Each is now a kind of ancient ruin, evoking in us haunting memories of events that occurred there: events insignificant when measured on any historical or worldly scale, but of great importance to Celine, Jesse and anyone who shared their evening together.

We re-visit the green bridge outside the train station. Another train passes beneath it, carrying unknown passengers to unknown destinations. There's no trace of the two amateur actors who

invited our couple to attend their play. How did it go for them? Were they disappointed Celine and Jesse failed to show up? Did they even remember extending the invitation?

The Café boat on the Danube is closed now, bathed in morning sunlight and deserted. The table and chairs where Jesse and Celine negotiated their first “goodbye” are now emotionally lifeless, awaiting the next occupants to give them life again. Strauss’s “Vienna Blood” is gone too. The Bach music we hear now is not part of our memory, but instead comments *on* that recollection from an emotional distance.

Next we visit the stone balcony overlooking a picturesque Viennese street where Celine and Jesse contemplated the magic of their brief time together. Vehicular traffic is returning to the street below. The magic is gone.

The narrow alley with the wooden pallet where Jesse and Celine had their first serious discussion about love and commitment contains no sign of life now. The Cemetery of the No-Names, where Celine told Jesse about a memorable experience she had there and the conclusions about life and death she drew from it, is an emotionally empty shell, forgotten again. It’s an interesting example of one person having two memorable experiences in the same place, separated by many years.

The Prater Ferris wheel and amusement park, where our couple shared their first kiss and strolled around the grounds talking about their parents and the difficulties of maintaining a happy relationship, are closed. The wheel is motionless, the amusement park deserted. Kleines Café is closed and shuttered, its tables neatly stacked and its umbrellas furled. We see no trace at all, except in our memories, of the disagreement that occurred here. Where is the palm reader now? What’s *her* story? Will she return tonight and cause discord between another couple? All we see

at present is an old man carrying a yellow bag, passing from and to somewhere for reasons unknown to us.

There's no trace of the poet on the river bank where Celine and Jesse had their most serious argument and were inadvertently rescued from it by him. Does the poet have a day job? Does he return to this spot every night to fleece another pair of tourists? Two electric trains pass each other, going in opposite directions, on a bridge in the distance, each carrying passengers to different destinations.

We press on to the park where Jesse and Celine may or may not have had sex. The remnants of their passion consist of one empty wine bottle and two empty glasses. An old woman carrying a large bag limps by, ignoring the small pile of litter our couple left behind. Does she, and for that matter does the old man walking past Kleines Café, have ancient recollections of a night such as the one Celine and Jesse shared? If so, are their lovers dead and gone? Did irreconcilable differences drive them apart long ago? Maybe Linklater and co-writer Kim Krizan were thinking fondly of their own family elders when they included these two anonymous old characters in this remarkably touching montage.

This is an admittedly bizarre analogy, but the montage near the end of *Before Sunrise* reminds me of a shorter montage at the end of John Carpenter's 1978 horror film, *Halloween*. In that movie the camera takes us on a final tour of some of the locations homicidal maniac Michael Myers visited earlier that evening. Menacing music and the oppressive, ever-louder sound of his heavy breathing infuses his presence into those now empty settings, fuelling our paranoia that he could be anywhere or *everywhere*. In *Before Sunrise* the effect is nearly the opposite. The montage of familiar locations fills us with an acute sense of Celine and Jesse's *absence*. These

settings now seem deserted and lifeless, except for our recollections of what occurred there a few hours earlier. Those hours now seem like years, if not decades, in the past. On their own modest scale, the empty locations in this montage are as dramatically potent as ancient ruins evoking the once vibrant activity of a now-extinct civilization. We almost begin to wonder if Celine and Jesse were ever in Vienna.

Cut to Jesse seated alone, probably by choice, at the back of a bus headed for the Vienna Airport. So we have *not* yet permanently parted from the film's main characters. He glances around, then settles back against the headrest, closes his eyes and smiles to himself.

Cut to Celine seated alone, also by choice, on board the train to Paris. She stares ahead at nothing in particular, thinking about something, ignoring the open book in her lap. Presumably the same book in which she was genuinely engrossed before she met Jesse. The camera closes in on her ever so slowly, as though not to disturb her private thoughts. Like Jesse, she too leans back against the headrest and smiles to herself. Then she closes her eyes and goes to sleep. Fade out. End credits.

So what is the meaning of those two private smiles? And do they signify the same thing? Are they smiles of contentment, expressing confidence that Celine and Jesse will indeed re-unite in six months? Or do they signify the pleasant recollection of an unexpected, fleeting romantic diversion for two people who had so recently experienced bitter breakups? Do these characters look *back* on their magical night in Vienna as the romantic equivalent of a one-night stand, or *forward* to a promise they intend to keep?

Forget for a moment what will be revealed nine years later in *Before Sunset*. Everything seems clear or inevitable with hindsight, even when it isn't. Is there "hope for the hopeless" or not? Can

an “unlikely couple” learn “to cope with the emotionless mediocrity of day-to-day living?” Not every night, even between the most devoted of lovers, can be like the one Jesse and Celine experienced in Vienna. There will always be some empty, dead space between two people, both before and after a “great night” together. And even the great night enjoyed by Jesse and Celine had its awkward moments of disagreement, boredom, manipulation, suspicion and misunderstanding. Such moments don’t necessarily lead to a permanent split, though they can.

The song played over the end credits declares “This is *life*.” *Before Sunrise* captures a sense of the fullness of life like few other films I’ve encountered. It evokes a bittersweet awareness of the subtle, almost imperceptible twists and turns that lead us here and there, occasionally provoking significant, lasting consequences. The empty space between individuals is never as easily or permanently bridged as we sometimes like to think. *Before Sunrise* contains no melodramatic plot devices to convince us otherwise. Nothing earth-shattering throws our romantic couple together and then either pacifies or makes an all-too-easy joke of their differences in temperament, perspective, mood, experience and belief. Instead we see Jesse and Celine “unplugged” so to speak, getting acquainted in the absence of the usual dramatic props that as often as not falsify that difficult process. And what an exhilarating process their unadorned journey proved to be.

If the brief acquaintance between Celine and Jesse hadn’t been so rich in detail and so free of extraneous drama, there would have been no good reason to continue it in *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*. But it was. So the creators of *Before Sunrise* did. And rather than rehash their great original, they aggressively pursued and dramatized the inevitable changes that come with age and experience. Changes that are anticipated and to some extent play out even with the

short time span of *Before Sunrise*. Thanks to the trilogy, which in time could become a quartet and more, we all get to participate in the time travel experiment Jesse proposed to Celine, in the lounge car of a train briefly stopped in Vienna, to persuade her to come explore with him.

Before Sunset: Reviving the Rhythm

Before Sunset begins with the famous Warner Brothers “WB” shield, half of which, along with the letter “B,” disappears. Then the “W” becomes an amalgam of “W” and “I,” the logo for Warner Independent Pictures. This preliminary business has nothing to do with the story that follows. Nevertheless it’s a visualization of two entities breaking apart and then becoming one again, which is not unlike the difficult journey Jesse and Celine make from the end of *Before Sunrise* through the end of *Before Sunset*.

The story begins in Paris, in a private residential lane. It’s a quiet haven isolated from an outside world barely visible to us in the far background, through a small archway leading to a busy Paris street. Our initial vantage point is situated deep inside the sanctuary, which appears half in shadow and half in sunlight. Green shuttered windows decorate tan walls. Green foliage shades us overhead. Only late in the film do we discover that Celine lives in an apartment within this peaceful refuge. We begin our journey, unknowingly, with her. She also performs the song, “An Ocean Apart,” that plays over the opening credits. It’s a lovely, cool song about the passionate subject of disappointed love: an emotional mixture of light and shadow, in keeping with the setting of the opening shot.

Verse after verse tells a tale of the joy of being together followed inevitably by the pain of breaking up, with a few thinly veiled references to Celine's situation with Jesse at the end of *Before Sunrise*. At the conclusion the singer paints a grim portrait of a rapidly closing window of opportunity for happiness. "Time goes by and then we die. And everything went too fast." The last line is repeated twice more for emphasis. Yet these gloomy lyrics are sun-dappled with strumming guitar and glistening harp harmonies.

The film's second shot reverses our perspective, placing us out on the busy street, looking back towards the doorway leading to the private lane. People walk to and fro, some with companions, others alone. Cars and trucks move left and right. Signs advertise this and that. Starting with this shot and continuing through several more, Linklater gives us a brief, random tour of some of the sights of Paris. As with many of the conversations between Celine and Jesse in *Before Sunrise*, context comes later.

The third shot shows us a tour boat on the Seine River, reminiscent of the restaurant boat on the Danube in Vienna. The cathedral of Notre Dame looms in the background, beyond a bridge with vehicular traffic moving perpendicular to the river. Pedestrians mill about at river's edge. Like the first shot after Jesse and Celine leave the train terminal to explore Vienna in the first movie, this one emphasizes the multiplicity of human activity in three dimensions. Add a blue sky and thin grey clouds and it all makes a very pretty, pleasant picture.

Next we visit a green, partly enclosed bower. One person sits on a green bench quietly reading a book. A man and his young daughter pass by, hand-in-hand, enjoying some sort of adventure together. Who are these people and what are their stories? We haven't the time to pursue them, But they're included as more than just visual filler. Because our hero and heroine met under

similarly random, casual circumstances, we should be more keenly aware of the fuller lives behind these brief encounters, and of the never-to-be-bridged space between us and these passing strangers.

Next we see, from a nearly overhead point of view, a broad sidewalk along a busy Paris street, the two divided by a row of tall trees. Lots of people and vehicles are traveling from and to somewhere. A huge wall occupies the right edge of the screen. What and who are on the other side? Then a quick stop in front of “Le Pure Café,” with sidewalk seating for those so inclined, like the Kleines Café in Vienna. On to another street with another cathedral, this one smaller than Notre Dame and reminiscent of the one Celine and Jesse visited nine years earlier. Will they have another intimate conversation in this church? No. Paris will not be a simple re-run of Vienna. The circumstances are different. Some things change. Other don’t.

Though we don’t realize it yet, the montage of Paris locations that begins *Before Sunset* harkens back to the montage of Vienna locales that closed *Before Sunrise*. In the first movie we revisited places previously infused with dramatic meaning by Jesse and Celine’s wanderings through them. In the sequel Linklater gives us previews of places his characters will *later* visit and infuse with meaning. In dramatic terms the second montage is a reversal of the first. And we will conclude *Before Sunset* in approximately the same location where we began: Celine’s apartment within that sun-dappled private lane.

The opening montage ends when we reach the bookshop *Shakespeare and Company*: a quaint, appealing, very European tribute to England’s greatest writer in the heart of France. Like the main character we encounter inside, it’s a bit of a fish out of water. A tourist. Some of the shop’s books are displayed outside, accessible to pedestrians on the sidewalk. A few pedestrians

peruse those books. Others walk on by, attending to other matters. *None* of them appear interested in the literary event taking place inside, just as a significant portion of the movie-going public won't be interested in films like *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*.

The bookshop's display window features a new novel entitled *This Time*, by Jesse Wallace. *Our Jesse?* Amazingly we never learned his last name in *Before Sunrise*. The cover of Jesse's book depicts a man and a woman in silhouette, facing each other, possibly against a backdrop of Vienna. A sign next to the book promotes a Question and Answer event with the author occurring inside the shop. Q and A harkens back to a similar, though private, session between Jesse and Celine on a train in Vienna. And like its predecessor, this episode raises questions Jesse would rather not answer.

The gathering of author, bookshop proprietor, reporters and customers is small, relatively intimate for a public event. One of the reporters is a woman. Visually backed by two other women, both customers, holding copies of *This Time*, she asks Jesse if his novel is autobiographical. That's getting right to the heart of the matter. And it's equivalent to Celine asking, during their private Q and A in Vienna, if he had ever been in love. Jesse is equally evasive on both occasions.

Nearly a decade older than when we last saw him, Jesse looks different. His hair is shorter. There are more wrinkles on his brow. He wears a suit jacket but no tie—a minor concession to his newfound literary celebrity. He wears a ring on the fourth finger of his left hand. Did he and Celine marry? Backed by a wall of books, fronted by a table containing copies of his book and fancy glasses for wine or champagne (no need to con a bottle of wine or steal glasses from a bartender on *this* trip), he appears the very image of a modestly successful writer. Has *everything*

fallen nicely into place for him since he left Vienna nine years ago? By slowly doling out the facts about Jesse and Celine's current situation throughout *Before Sunset*, Linklater and his actors/co-writers keep us guessing. More than that, by occasionally making the past a point of contention between Celine and Jesse, the filmmakers encourage us to question the foundation of memory itself, especially with regard to private lives and passions.

But some things don't change much. Jesse is still Jesse, fumbling for a reply to a question he doesn't want to answer. A question many writers don't like to answer. Familiar too is his method of evasion, transforming a specific inquiry into something more general, abstract and safe. "Isn't *everything* autobiographical? I mean, we all see the world through our own tiny keyhole." He paraphrases fellow writer Tom Wolfe to reinforce his point and further distract his audience from getting too inquisitive about his personal life.

Viewed in long shot from behind the modest press contingent, and literally in the spotlight of a lamp on the table in front of him and a photo-journalist taking pictures, Jesse may be cornered, but he's as glib and slippery as ever. "We are the sum of all the moments in our lives" he argues persuasively. So we're bound to use those moments as fodder for our writing, even when it's fiction. Jesse has never experienced the kind of violence and intrigue many other authors write about. But he insists his life, "from my own point of view, has been full of drama," which is also a valid defense of both this movie and its predecessor, since neither contains the action and melodrama of many films.

Warming to his topic, Jesse talks about trying to capture in his novel the experience of meeting and making a connection with someone. The camera cuts away to flashbacks of Celine and Jesse in Vienna: private impressions racing through Jesse's mind at this moment even though he's

talking in safely anonymous, generic terms to an audience of strangers. He politely asks the reporter if he's answered her original question to her satisfaction, hoping to get by without further personal disclosures.

Being a journalist, the woman does not let him off the hook so easily. Any more than Celine let him get by, in a Vienna nightclub, with not answering her question about who recently broke up with him. The reporter wants to know if there really was a French girl with whom he spent a night in Vienna. Jesse insists it's not important. "So that's a "yes" grins his interrogator, accurately reading between the lines of his evasive answer. The camera does likewise, flashing back again to several passionate moments he shared with Celine. He reluctantly admits there was a French girl, but offers no further details. The reporter is satisfied, up to a point. No doubt she would like the full personal story behind the fictitious one. But time is short, there are other reporters to satisfy and Jesse is not about to divulge the *whole* story of Vienna.

The ambiguous ending of *Before Sunrise* was one of its best features. Allowing viewers to decide, each according to his or her inclinations, whether or not Celine and Jesse get back together after six months apart revealed as much about themselves as about the characters. But the very act of *choosing* a postscript left unscripted demonstrated our desire for a resolution. Likewise one of the journalists interviewing Jesse wants to know what he thinks happened to the characters after the novel ended.

Jesse's reaction probably echoes those of director Linklater, co-writer Kim Krizan and performers Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy when questioned about the ambiguous ending of *Before Sunrise*. Art imitates life? It's a good test of whether or not the viewer is a romantic or a cynic, suggests Jesse to *his* audience. He astutely speculates that the three reporters facing him

have different opinions on the matter. The young woman, he concludes, thinks the fictional couple got back together. She nods her head in confirmation. The young man who posed the question to Jesse in the first place hopes they reunited but is not certain they did. An older reporter thinks the characters did *not* reunite, confirming Jesse's guess about him. Is optimism versus pessimism a function of gender, age, temperamental inclination, past experience or passing mood? Standing behind the journalists are six patrons, anonymous representatives of various age groups and both sexes. We'll never know how each of *them* would answer the question because their opinions are not solicited on this occasion. Maybe they'll debate the matter with each other and with friends and family after the interview.

The woman reporter repeats her colleague's original question, inquiring if *Jesse* thinks his fictional characters got back together or not—the question he cleverly avoided by turning it back on the reporters. Then she probes for more autobiographical information, picking up the thread of her earlier question. “Did you in real life?” Like many artists, Jesse doesn't like personal questions which remove the barrier between him and strangers. Most of us would react the same way if we were in his position. Yet the reporter's inquiry about Jesse's private life is precisely what we, the *film* audience, want to know about the characters Jesse and Celine. Jesse equivocates again, but in a colorful way that charms and disarms his inquisitors. “In the words of my grandfather, to answer that would take the piss out of the whole thing.” So does *Before Sunset* “take the piss out of” *Before Sunrise* by answering the question we were left with at the end of the first movie? Not in my opinion. *Before Sunset* is a separate entity, an elaborate “What if?” speculation on the open-ended *Before Sunrise*. The sequel explores just one of many potential futures for Jesse and Celine in the wake of the earlier film.

The final question of the Q and A session is about Jesse's next book. So soon after the release of his most recent one? The demand of an artist's public is insatiable. I suspect these questions come from interview experiences of the film's director, writers and actors. Questions they've heard and either answered or evaded a hundred times. Jesse isn't sure what his next book will be about, but he reveals the germ of an idea for one. It's an interesting idea, especially when he supplies details. But of equal interest to *us*, as opposed to the reporters in this scene, are the echoes from *Before Sunrise* reverberating through those details.

The basic premise of Jesse's next writing project is a man with a good job and a beautiful wife who is nevertheless depressed, yearning for passion, adventure and to "fight for meaning." That sounds like Jesse's confession to Celine, way back in that deserted alley in Vienna, that as much as he sometimes dreams of being a good husband and father, he fears it would prevent him from accomplishing something great with his life. Career versus romance. Does Jesse still feel that way? Or is he *telling* himself he still feels that way because, as we discover later, love and marriage did not turn out the way he had hoped. And the woman with whom he might have made a successful marriage eluded his grasp. "Happiness is in the doing, not in the getting" he tells the reporters, which sounds like something Celine said, in that same alley, about striving to bridge the space between herself and another person: "The answer must be in the attempt."

Jesse's fictional dissatisfied man sees his young daughter dancing on top of a table to the music of a pop song. A visual flashback of Celine and Jesse dancing to Bach's *Goldberg Variation* No.25 on a side street in Vienna informs us, but not the reporters, where he might have gotten the idea. That's evidence supporting Jesse's theory that everything we create, even fiction, has autobiographical origins, even though the relationship between the two may be complicated and

convoluted. Celine is not Jesse's daughter, yet the memory of Celine dancing with him in Vienna somehow inserted itself into an idea for his next novel.

In theory Jesse's next novel will take place within the duration of a pop song and consist of present and past impressions. The dancing daughter reminds the novel's protagonist of his wife when she was his teenage girlfriend, dancing to the same song on the roof of her car after the two of them had sex and she told him she loved him for the first time. The girlfriend looks very much like the man's daughter many years later. "He knows he's not *remembering* this dance. He's *there*, in both moments simultaneously" suggests an unbreakable link between past and present. More images from *Before Sunrise* flash on screen: Jesse and Celine taking mental pictures of each other after dancing to Bach, determined to remember that moment in vivid detail. He obviously does, which is perhaps why he describes the experience as *being* rather than just remembering. What we don't know yet is how painful the memory is for him, because we don't know the current state of his relationship with Celine.

Surprise! The camera cuts to a shot of Celine, aged nine years since the flashback image immediately preceding it. She's standing elsewhere in the bookshop, looking at Jesse, still beautiful yet different. She looks more sophisticated. Above and behind her head we see book category captions printed in Spanish and French—a subtle reminder of the cultural differences between her and Jesse, about which she teased him on the train to Vienna.

Concluding his big idea for a new book, Jesse tells his audience, "In an instant all his life is just folding in on itself. And it's obvious to him that time is a lie . . ." Glancing to his right, he spots Celine. Life imitates proposed art. Jesse is in Vienna by way of memory, and Paris in the flesh, simultaneously. And somehow Celine is with him in both places. He pauses, struggling to

complete his answer for the reporters while at the same time dealing with the shocking reality of Celine's presence. He looks away from her and back to his audience. Celine smiles and looks away too. "It's all happening all the time. And inside every moment is another moment happening simultaneously" he tells them, more astutely now than he originally thought.

The reporters, especially the one who wanted autobiographical information, are unaware of the great story they *could* write about, standing just a few feet away. They'll have to be content with the fictionalized version. Meanwhile, reminding us of the space separating Jesse, Celine, us and the curious reporters from the rest of the world, a bookshop patron is visible browsing books far behind the guest of honor. Not particularly interested in Jesse, his current novel, his ideas for a future book or his personal life, the stranger is preoccupied with other matters.

Mercifully, though not realizing it, the bookshop proprietor calls a halt to Jesse's interview, announcing the author's impending departure for the airport to catch a plane home. Speaking in English, for Jesse's benefit, he thanks both author and audience for coming. Speaking in French, for everyone else in the shop, he informs customers and reporters, who likewise accommodated Jesse by posing their questions in English, of refreshments available nearby.

My description of Jesse's reaction to the sight of Celine jumped the gun, because truthfully we still don't know what happened between them after they parted in Vienna. Maybe they're married and living in the United States, and she's just arrived to pick up her husband for the ride to the airport and the flight back home. Except that Jesse's reaction to seeing her, relatively controlled as it is for the sake of concealing his emotions from reporters and patrons, suggests astonishment. He asks the proprietor how long he has before he must leave for the airport. Not long. Certainly not the full evening he and Celine enjoyed while getting acquainted in Vienna.

A caption for books on "Religion" hangs over Jesse's head during his brief conversation with the bookshop owner. We learn during the course of this movie that his views on religion have softened over the years, while Celine's have hardened. But like the opening montage of Parisian locations that mean nothing specific to us yet, we must wait for context before the sign has any significance for us beyond the immediate and literal.

Jesse joins Celine in a relatively secluded area of the book stacks. He passes by several shelved books whose covers face the camera: "Blue" retroactively echoes the mood he's tried to repress since losing Celine; "This One" perhaps identifies Celine as *the* woman of his dreams. And "For Men" suggests . . . I have no idea. Maybe the book covers have no extrinsic meaning whatsoever. Or maybe "For Men" is an arbitrary designation emphasizing differences between the sexes and how they view the world. Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, that sort of thing, referring to the gender differences exhibited by Jesse and Celine in *Before Sunrise*. Or were those differences between individuals rather than between men and women?

Visible behind Celine are some old photographs that appear to be of the bookshop in earlier days, and of authors who previously visited as invited guests. If so, what were *their* personal stories? Are they alive or dead? Will Jesse be added to the gallery, becoming one of those famous or forgotten "celebrities" whose image could become the mere backdrop of some future romantic encounter, his own life and private drama long since faded from anyone else's memory, existing only in the fictional guise of his first novel?

Smiling, Jesse greets Celine with a conventional, cautious "Hi." Smiling, she responds likewise with "Hello." They exchange polite kisses on the cheek. *That's* their reaction to each other after a gap of nine years that is by now finally obvious to us? Of course it is. Getting re-acquainted after

so long, especially in the aftermath of disappointed love (we don't know the details about that yet), can be as difficult as getting acquainted the first time. Self-defensive restraint and formality rule their initial reactions, though nervous laughter from both suggests a keen awareness of the awkwardness and inadequacy of their greetings.

The preliminary Q and A includes "How are you?" "Good. And you?" and "I'm good. I'm great." Lies. Polite lies, but lies nonetheless. Jesse invites Celine for a cup of coffee, just as he invited her to the lounge car aboard the train on which they first met. Celine considerably points out he has a plane to catch, as if she showed up at the bookshop just to exchange a cursory greeting and say goodbye again. They're deceiving themselves and each other, for understandable reasons. They're protecting themselves emotionally, but not so much that they're unwilling to risk further exploration. They agree to meet outside, after Jesse finishes his business with the bookshop owner.

Jesse negotiates a quick deal with the proprietor, who seems contractually bound to get him to the airport on time. Fortunately the author has already signed all copies of his book (*his* contractual obligation?), so he can quickly follow Celine. The proprietor instructs Jesse to get his limousine driver's business card so he can contact the man by cell phone if necessary. He also efficiently arranges to have Jesse's luggage placed in the car in advance of Jesse's departure for the airport, so there won't be a delay when he returns. And he points out the driver, Philippe, standing nearby. All in all, the proprietor unwittingly both facilitates (removing possible delays) and obstructs (reminding Jesse of his airport deadline) Jesse's reunion with Celine. Their separate agendas and different priorities overlap to the reasonable satisfaction of both. Whether or not Jesse and Celine can reach the same harmony remains to be seen.

Philippe's brief confusion about which pocket contains his business cards is mildly annoying to an impatient Jesse, but not sufficiently for Jesse to be impolite. Only *we* recognize and appreciate Jesse's eagerness to leave the bookshop. No one else around him does. Some of the patrons take an interest in the author as he departs. One woman seems to have a bit of a crush on Jesse, judging by the way she looks at him. In retrospect she foreshadows a more serious celebrity/groupie incident that leads to an argument between Jesse and Celine in *Before Midnight*. But on this occasion Jesse has no idea an admirer is standing behind him. Their connection is momentary, superficial and entirely one-sided.

Outside the shop, amidst well-manicured shrubs and well-stocked bookcases, Jesse finally allows himself to express genuine surprise and pleasure at seeing Celine. "I can't believe you're here!" She, by contrast, downplays the encounter, casually pointing out that she lives in Paris. Further distancing herself emotionally from Jesse, she suggests the bookshop might need more of his time. She's gives him every opportunity to back away from any renewal of their acquaintance because she doesn't want to seem too eager for it herself, and thereby make herself vulnerable to him. Jesse declines her invitation to bail. "They're sick of me" he insists, probably exaggerating for the sake of convenience. He wants to spend his remaining time in Paris with Celine, and pads his argument for doing so.

Why is Celine less eager than Jesse to renew their acquaintance? After all, she came to his interview, which suggests at least some interest on her part. This is another of those questions that time alone will answer. We eventually discover that Celine read about Jesse's marriage and child in a magazine article. Yet she knows nothing about the sad state of that marriage, so her reluctance to re-ignite an old flame is understandable. He, on the other hand, knows nothing

about her marital status and is all too aware of his own crumbling marriage. Getting reacquainted with Celine offers hopeful romantic possibilities for Jesse.

Despite the intimacy they once enjoyed, these two characters repeat their tentative re-introduction from the shop. "How are you?" asks Jesse. "I'm fine," Celine replies with less than complete honesty. "This is so weird" is at best a mild acknowledgement of how significant the encounter is for both characters. But at least it's more than Celine is willing to concede, so far. An awkward silence ensues, as it did on the bridge in Vienna just after they got off the train together. Celine breaks their silence, inviting Jesse to a nearby café. Funny, didn't *he* invite *her* for coffee a just few moments ago? Neither is thinking very clearly, betraying emotions neither is yet willing to acknowledge.

As in Vienna, we often accompany Jesse and Celine on their Paris journey via a backtracking and occasionally forward tracking camera, capturing long stretches of real time without a break. As their trek to the café begins, Jesse again acknowledges the excitement of their unexpected reunion, claiming he almost lost control of himself in the bookshop when he spotted her. Celine informs him it's her favorite bookstore, where she often sits and reads for hours, half-imploring that her encounter with Jesse there was the coincidental result of a routine visit. She adds, "There's fleas" inside the shop. Fleas?! She's avoiding the topic they're both dying to discuss: a topic painful to both, though for different reasons. But at least she supplies a conversational opening for Jesse, who commiserates. He spent last night in the bookstore loft with a cat sleeping on his head. They might be avoiding what they really want to talk about, but this seemingly trivial chit-chat is their way of working towards the mutual trust that will allow them to discuss more passionate matters. The awkward space between them, between any two strangers, has

reasserted itself since they largely overcame it in Vienna nine years earlier. It must be peeled away, layer by layer, before they can rediscover the confidential ease they once enjoyed.

Prominently visible on the fourth finger of his left hand is Jesse's wedding ring. Since it is obvious now that Celine is not his wife, we're curious about the story behind that ring, long before they get around to discussing it. But because we're detached if interested observers, it's much easier for us to be inquisitive about a topic that is potentially divisive to them.

As Celine and Jesse discuss the bookshop they pass by a street musician playing an accordion, with a dog at his feet and a hat on the sidewalk into which appreciative passersby can toss money. In Vienna our couple stopped, observed and paid a belly dancer and a poet for their efforts. They also paused for a moment to listen to a folk singer in a nightclub and a small group of musicians play "Vienna Blood" on a cafe boat. These live performances were part of their adventure together. They discovered Vienna and each other at the same time, integrating both experiences. But this time they are too wrapped in each other, the tensions of getting reacquainted and the emotional burdens of the past, to pay much attention to anyone or anything along their path. *We* notice more of their surroundings than do they. Not until Jesse and Celine reach the courtyard in which her apartment is located, at the end of the film, will we hear Jesse utter anything approaching "This is beautiful!", his exultation about Vienna.

An older couple walking behind Jesse and Celine take some notice of the street musician, but not much. Maybe they've seen him or his like too many times to bother anymore. Far behind our couple, behind a fence across the street, a large crowd is gathered. Are they tourists on a guided tour? Seated on a bench beneath the fence are one woman alone and three other people conversing together. People cross our path in singles and pairs as we accompany Jesse and

Celine on their journey. There are countless life stories all around us. But we will connect with very few of them.

Edging closer to the subject of keen interest to both, and thereby closing the nine-year emotional gap that separates them, Celine admits she read an article about a book that sounded “vaguely familiar.” Later she saw an announcement advertising the author’s upcoming appearance at the bookshop. But until she saw Jesse’s photo on that announcement, she wasn’t certain it was him. She, like we, never learned his last name in Vienna. So it took a number of lucky coincidences, and possibly a thread of intentional design on Jesse’s part, to get them back together.

The first *big* question in the movie comes from Jesse, always the more impulsive of these two characters. After all, *he* took the risk of asking her to get off the train and spend the night with him in Vienna. It’s not surprising he would take the first leap now. Did Celine read his book? Yes, she read it twice. Did she like it? She claims she did, but in a voice a little too enthusiastic and in terms a little too clinical to be convincing. “Very romantic. I usually don’t like that, but it’s really well-written” she insists, touching Jesse’s arm with both hands for emphasis. Jesse recognizes equivocation when he hears it. But this is too soon to press the matter and risk an argument, so he politely accepts her faint praise.

Finally Celine summons the courage to ask *her* first big question. Bigger than Jesse’s, it’s the question everyone who’s paying attention, including reporters back at the bookshop and fans of *Before Sunrise*, want answered. She reaches out to stop their stroll, as she did in that narrow Viennese alley when she wanted to tell him her most serious thoughts about love. Did Jesse show up in Vienna on December 16th, nine years ago? For tactical advantage, as he did several

times in Vienna, Jesse turns the tables on Celine before giving his answer. No, she admits, she “couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t” is not precisely the same as “didn’t.” But maybe Jesse doesn’t pick up on that subtle difference, because when Celine repeats her question, more urgently this time, he reacts with a hint of bitter, feigned indifference. “Why [would you want to know], if you didn’t?” He uses the word “didn’t,” implying it was Celine’s *choice* not to meet him in Vienna. There’s nothing overtly hostile in Jesse’s reply--nothing to trigger a nasty confrontation between them. Nevertheless his is the first act of revenge in this movie, albeit based on a misunderstanding of what Celine said.

Pressed for an answer, Jesse tosses off a lie that we don’t recognize as such until later, when he admits it. He did *not* return to Vienna on December 16th. Celine is greatly relieved, at first, because it absolves her of guilt she’s long held. But Jesse supplies an important addendum to his answer. “If one of us had shown up alone, then it would have sucked.” Celine agrees, which sets her up to feel guilty when Jesse changes his story later. He now holds a potential moral advantage over her should he desire to exercise it later.

We subsequently learn that Jesse *did* return to Vienna in search of Celine. So why does he lie about it now: to mercifully relieve Celine of guilt feelings, or to protect himself from appearing foolishly romantic? Pointing out hypothetically that it would have “sucked” if one of them showed up while the other didn’t is Jesse’s indirect way of blaming her for his pain. The façade of politeness exhibited by these characters in the bookshop is beginning to crack.

Celine’s disclosure that she couldn’t make their appointed rendezvous because her beloved grandmother died and was buried the very day she was to be in Vienna puts a new face on their

situation. Jesse's veiled resentment melts away, partly, and is replaced by Celine's not so veiled resentment. She is surprised he remembers that her grandmother lived in Budapest. "I remember everything" he tells her. How thoughtful, until she realizes that even though she had intended to meet Jesse on December 16th, he apparently wasn't there. They stop walking again while Celine scolds Jesse for breaking his promise. "You better have a good reason" she demands. By playing games with the truth, Jesse risks alienating Celine.

Visible behind Celine a tourist shoots photos of some historical landmark to which our couple are indifferent. Nor do they visit a cathedral visible in the distance (the same one we saw in the film's opening montage), as they did a similar one in Vienna. Paris is almost incidental to their concerns, creating a degree of tension between our, or at least my, reactions to the city and theirs. There will be no palm readers, poets, bartenders or Ferris wheels this time.

The silent expression on Jesse's face informs Celine of the truth. He *was* in Vienna on the appointed day. Guilt floods back into her, yet she laughs at the same time. She quickly apologizes for the latter, but it's an understandable contradiction. She feels bad for breaking her promise to Jesse, but at the same time happy that he kept his promise to her. "Did you hate me? You must have hated me. Have you been hating me all this time? You have!" The words rush out of her, more as horrified statements of fact than as real questions.

Jesse assures Celine he does not hate her and never did. But then he adds, jokingly, "I flew all the way over there. You blew the thing off. And my life's been a big nosedive since then. But it's not a problem." Celine is clearly vulnerable here, so Jesse claims he's just kidding. But he's not *entirely* kidding, except maybe himself. Even though he now knows she had a valid excuse for not showing up, years of deep disappointment and bitterness do not evaporate in a minute.

Jesse's little joke at Celine's expense is a passive/aggressive act of retaliation. Maybe not consciously, but it is.

As often happened in Vienna, another couple is juxtaposed with Jesse and Celine as they unburden themselves about their reunion fiasco. The strangers appear happy together, but as we've learned from the hero and heroine, superficial appearances can be deceiving.

Celine is desperate to apologize and be forgiven. Jesse mercifully reassures her that he figured some emergency like the one she experienced had prevented her from returning to Vienna, implying that he's harbored no ill will against her during the nine years that followed. He admits to feeling bad about it for a while, but insists he neither hated nor resented her for it. If that were entirely true, the conversational battles they will soon wage would be unnecessary. In *Before Sunrise* we saw how much both of them suffered after being dumped by previous lovers, and how bitter they were about it. It took them quite awhile to emerge from their defensive shells, and they never did completely. Their idiotic bargain not to exchange addresses and telephone numbers, which subsequently kept them apart for nine years, was partly a product of that defensiveness.

Reason takes over and smoothes the tension between them, for now. Both agree they should have exchanged contact information in Vienna. Failing to do so was "stupid." An agreement-fest follows as they overlap each other's lines of dialog in an effort to reach a mutually happy resolution of the whole unpleasant memory. Hindsight is twenty-twenty. In *Before Sunrise* the same two characters spent a fair amount of time and effort reasoning their way *out* of exchanging phone numbers and addresses, because they were convinced long-distance romances don't work. And at the time their arguments seemed to make sense.

Celine inquires how long Jesse staid in Vienna after she failed to meet him. A couple days, he replies. "Did you meet another girl?" she asks. Is she serious? Maybe the recollection of his wayward glance at another woman outside a Vienna nightclub triggers her suspicion. But it's badly timed in view of the fact that both characters now realize Jesse kept his promise while Celine, albeit with a good excuse, did not. Jesse pretends to play along, punishing her for her crass inquiry. Yes, he met a girl named Gretchen. For a moment Celine believes him. Her faith in male fidelity is still not strong. Jesse quickly and wisely retracts his phony claim, adding that he returned to the train station and held up signs to catch Celine's attention in case she arrived late. He's probably telling the truth, but he's also reminding her that she is the guilty party for not showing up at all, not him for allegedly hooking up with another woman.

When he returned home after his disappointment in Vienna, Jesse owed his father two thousand dollars for the trip. By mentioning that fact to Celine, he places another emotional debt on her shoulders. Despite his self-mocking tone of voice and Celine's legitimate excuse for not returning to Vienna, he's giving vent to his long-held frustration about her failure to meet him as arranged. But he pushes his vindictiveness too far by adding that his father warned him about "French chicks." From the sound of his delivery, he doesn't entirely disagree with dear old dad. Remember back in Vienna when he accused Celine of being serious, even though she was "officially kidding," when she callously pointed out that in some insect species the female kills the male after mating. But she did so only after Jesse told his horny monkey story in a blatant attempt to persuade her to have sex with him. Whether the subject is culture or gender, these two characters have plenty of ammunition with which to wound each other, when they're motivated to do so.

Celine bites back a little after Jesse's "French chicks" comment. The bigger part of him does not want to pick a fight with her, so he immediately retreats by discrediting his father, who he *now* claims never met a French woman or visited France. Then why quote the old man? Jesse did not have kind things to say about his father in *Before Sunrise*. He even told Celine his father never wanted him to be born in the first place. Yet now, because part of him wants to hurt Celine for, however unintentionally, hurting him, Jesse momentarily parrots his father's idiotic opinion of French women—an insult combining *both* culture and gender.

Celine asks why Jesse didn't write about the unfaithful "French bitch" in his book. He reveals that he did write a version of the ending in which she shows up at the appointed time and place. Celine wants to know the outcome, clearly interested in how Jesse imagined their reunion. It's important to her not for literature's sake but because she wonders what his intentions were for their future together, if they'd had one.

Under pressure to respond, Jesse hesitantly admits he imagined them indulging in marathon sex for about ten days. To Celine it sounds like she's being cast as a "French slut" in his sexist male fantasy. Maybe she's still pissed off at his "French chicks" remark, which she's since re-defined twice, as "French bitch" and "French slut." But Jesse's fictionalized and therefore safely detached vision of what might have happened had they reunited in Vienna is less insulting than it is depressing. In his hypothetical scenario they get to know each other better and realize "they don't get along at all." Celine likes that ending. "It's more real." Perhaps unwittingly, she and Jesse conspire to reduce their unfulfilled love story to a romantic flop, making it easier for them to bear the disappointment of their failure to reconnect in Vienna. If we departed from their Paris journey at this moment, our lingering impression would be of two people who were once but are

no longer passionate about each other. Future developments suggest they are deceiving themselves and each other.

Jesse's editor did not like his original, downbeat ending, so the ambiguous ending got published. Celine observes cynically, "Everyone wants to believe in love. It sells." Jesse concurs. They're very glib about having risen above any sort of belief in the power of love. But it's a conveniently defensive attitude for both, since the prospect for a renewal of their Vienna passion seems dim at present.

Celine switches gears, veering away from their depressing topic and pointing out that his book is a bestseller in the United States. Not in Europe? Maybe that accounts for the small crowd at the bookshop. Are the two cultures out of sync again? Jesse downplays his novel's bestseller status and disparages its literary merits by comparing it unfavorably to *Moby Dick*. "I haven't read *Moby Dick* and I like your book" Celine counters, drawing a sincere thank you from Jesse. But she can't help dispensing a little criticism as well, accusing him of "idealizing" their night in Vienna. His defense is that "It's officially fiction. I'm *supposed* to [idealize reality]." But with her next comment Celine bares the truth of her objection to Jesse's novel. And it has nothing to do with his idealization of their Viennese adventure. It's all about Jesse portraying "me, well, I mean *her*. Right? No, me. Okay, whatever. A little bit neurotic."

Who is ever completely satisfied with a literary portrait of him or herself done by someone else? Jesse defends his book, insisting Celine *is* a little neurotic, which alarms her. So he backs off again, claiming, perhaps falsely, that he was only kidding. Then he denies having done it at all. Now it's Celine's turn to back off, conceding that being portrayed in Jesse's novel is "both flattering and disturbing at the same time." Jesse the author wants to know why it's disturbing.

For future reference? After all, he is contemplating another book that by his own admission is bound to contain autobiographical elements. "I don't know" evades Celine, who follows up with an answer implying that she *does* know. It's intimidating, she admits, to see herself through someone else's eyes. It makes her feel vulnerable. The two characters share a glance of mutual understanding.

Celine breaks eye contact and diverts their conversation to a less intimate topic, which is what she thought she was doing earlier when she brought up his novel's bestseller status. How long did it take Jesse to write his book? "Three or four years, on and off" he reveals, rubbing his face nervously. She points out, as he already knew, that it's a long time to be writing about a single night. They're back to intimate matters again, whether they like it or not. Obviously Jesse did not forget about Celine after their non-reunion, and brooded at length about their one night together. Celine figured Jesse *had* forgotten about her. Their initial pretense of emotional recovery is evaporating with each new revelation about the past nine years.

Now it's Jesse's turn to stop their walk and confess something important: how long he's wanted to talk with her. He admits what he's said to Celine thus far does not adequately convey what he *wants* to tell her, which has been our impression of both characters since they met in the bookshop. They've talked *around* so many issues between them. Celine worries about the time factor. Is she trying to avoid a renewed intimacy with him? Jesse assures her they have enough time to get reacquainted before he has to leave for the airport. Nevertheless, their window of opportunity in *Before Sunset* is much shorter than what it was in *Before Sunrise*.

Resuming their walk to the restaurant, Celine talks about her life during the past nine years. She works for Green Cross, an international environmental organization--a job in keeping

with hints of her social conscience in *Before Sunrise*, including her anger about war in the former Yugoslavia and the fact that no other country in Europe seemed willing to intervene. Jesse expresses admiration for Celine's chosen career, noting that most people, including himself, "just sit around and bitch." As part of his self-disparagement, and by implication his praise of Celine, he criticizes America's poor environmental record. Cultural differences that have on occasion sparked conflict between these two characters sneak back into their conversation, at first unobtrusively. But based on their history, it's always has the potential to cause problems.

Celine is relieved to learn that Jesse is not a "Freedom fries" American. How could we forget? The terrorist attack of 9/11 occurred between *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*. "Freedom fries" was what some angry Americans re-named French fries after the American press reported that some French citizens blamed the United States for the attack. 9/11 is never directly discussed in *Before Sunset*. But its emotional impact exacerbates the cultural divide between our couple. Jesse's vague response to Celine's Freedom fries remark seems like an expression of agreement, but is perfunctory at best. Celine's endorsement of Jesse's criticism of American society and perceptions, which he introduced into their conversation in order to flatter her, backfires, rendering him slightly defensive. Jesse quickly deflects their discussion away from the topic of American culture and back to Celine's work. He has never seemed the kind of blind patriot who cannot accept criticism of his country. But any conversation with Celine that pits America against France or Europe plugs into their battle of wills. When she criticizes the United States, she also targets him. When he criticizes France or Europe, he also targets her.

Twice during this discussion about Celine's job she initiates a direction change in their trek towards the restaurant. Paris is *her* city, giving her the home field advantage. In Vienna, though

Celine had visited there years earlier, she and Jesse were more evenly matched as tourists exploring new territory. Neither spoke or understood the native language well. But unlike Vienna the sights and sounds of Paris are of minor interest to our couple, who are more focused on exploring their private past and possible future together than they are the City of Light. At one point during this scene two men walking and talking together are visible between and behind Celine and Jesse. Neither couple notices the other in the narrow, mostly empty street. The same thing happened frequently in Vienna. But on occasion they *did* interact with the Viennese, or at least paused to comment about them. After they find each other in Paris, they have little time for anyone or anything else.

Jesse takes another crack at flattery, describing Celine's job as "cool," the ultimate American compliment. She enjoys it, humbly insisting she's been fortunate. Building on his modest success, Jesse reflects on his own political/environmental beliefs, admitting that he's alternated between moments of abject pessimism and cautious optimism. He contrasts his inclination to do nothing with Celine's hopeful activism, which is presumably making the world better. It sounds like another compliment, but Celine hears it differently. "Better? How could you possibly say that?" she asks him incredulously, as though he had devalued her work by ignoring the fact that so much remains to do. Jesse awkwardly defends his position by contending there are *some* things to be optimistic about. One gets the feeling that if Jesse had begun this new phase of their conversation by cynically insisting it is impossible to change anything for the better in this bad old world he would have drawn equal fire from Celine. It's not a debate he's not likely to win under any circumstances. The two characters avoid discussing the private issues that deeply divide them, yet the tension of those issues seeps into everything they *do* discuss.

Celine launches into a mini-tirade about why Jesse's optimism is so misplaced. And she prefaces her counterargument with a surprisingly personal attack. Holding her hands out to him in a disingenuous gesture of conciliation, she accuses Jesse of seeing the world through rose-colored glasses as a result of the success of his new book. In so many words, she's calling him a self-centered bastard. Describing Jesse's literary success as "great" and insisting she's happy for him is completely undercut by what she implied before and says next. "Let me break the news to you. The world is a *mess!*"

Viewed briefly from behind, this flare-up of misunderstanding between the characters occurs under an archway that renders both of them dark silhouettes. Barely fifteen minutes into their Paris odyssey, Jesse and Celine have their first argument. And Jesse, who may or may not have inadvertently triggered it by trying to flatter his way into Celine's good graces, suffers the worst of it. He barely gets a word in edgewise until Celine, ludicrously claiming she's not angry, *demand*s a justification for Jesse's optimism.

Pausing in the sunlight outside the archway, Jesse replies carefully and with deliberation, knowing he's treading on thin ice. Placing his hands between himself and Celine, in the same palms-out gesture of conciliation she offered so insincerely moments earlier, Jesse acknowledges the existence of many serious problems in the world. Celine lets out a sigh of relief. Then he drops a comic bomb on the proceedings. "I don't even have one publisher in the whole Asian market" he announces with mock consternation. Attempting to defuse the bad tension between them, Jesse humorously adopts the capitalist bastard role Celine so hastily assigned to him moments earlier. It's a gamble, but it seems to pay dividends.

Jesse laughs, confirming the joke. Celine smiles and flips him the bird somewhat playfully, as

she did in Vienna when they argued about the palm reader. Her rude gesture, or *mock* rude gesture (which is it?), briefly obscures a little golden figure of Cupid in the window of a nearby shop. The chances of a renewed romance between Jesse and Celine appear slim at this juncture. Potential disagreements and faulty communication are exacerbated by deep-seated, unacknowledged resentment and guilt stemming from their failure to re-unite in Vienna, and the nine years of emotional festering that followed.

Brushing aside Celine's insulting finger, Jesse modifies his defense in more serious terms. "All I'm saying is there's more awareness out there. Right? People are going to fight back." Slapping his right fist into the palm of his left hand, he employs a hand gesture of his own to reinforce his point. "Okay" acknowledges Celine. But she appears less convinced by Jesse's reasoning than motivated by a simple desire to end the dispute and avoid the destructive dead-end towards which they were headed. Resuming their walk, she leads him towards the promised restaurant, which offers the pleasant prospect of a distracting cup of coffee. But Jesse presses on, padding his argument with another round of flattery. It's people like Celine, "educated and speaking out," and not the success of his book that inspires his cautious optimism, he insists.

As they approach "Le Pure Café" our couple passes a man cleaning the street with a water hose. Just doing his job, presumably for a wage, rather than debating the woes of the world. Claiming that environmental consciousness is becoming the norm rather than the exception around the world, Jesse tries to justify his optimism in unselfish terms. But by accepting his argument at face value, Celine finds a different reason to challenge him. The culture gap rears its ugly head once more. Funny, that's the first thing that divided them in Vienna, when she poked fun at his lack of language skills and he retaliated by criticizing Europe's lack of service.

Jesse's vision of world-wide conservation awareness is re-defined by Celine as a convenient excuse for certain "imperialist countries" to justify their economic excesses. Jesse reacts suspiciously: "Is there a particular imperialist country you have in mind there, Frenchie?" The term "Frenchie" is not one of endearment. With a finger in her mouth Celine plays coyly innocent and denies pointing a figurative finger at Jesse's native land. They smile at one another as they dodge this particular conversational landmine and enter the restaurant to enjoy, hopefully, a congenial cup of coffee together. "Bon soir" greets an employee behind the counter, contradicting Jesse's old Vienna accusation of rude European customer service. "Bon soir" replies Jesse brightly in his meager French. The mood is lighter now. If only for a moment our couple is diverted from the divisive topic of environmental politics.

We follow Celine and Jesse to their picturesque table by an ornately etched, frosted window that somewhat isolates them from the outside world. All disputes seem to melt away as they remove their jackets, sit down and get comfortable. Jesse returns to their previous, contentious topic of conversation, but approaches it in a new way. He compares the political evolution of the world to that of a single human being. "Am I getting worse? Am I improving?" He points out that as a younger man he was physically healthier but "wracked with insecurities." Currently his problems are "deeper," yet he is "more equipped to handle them." What he offers is a seemingly balanced yet rather detached view of life, as opposed to Celine's passionate activism. He is no longer the cynic he once pretended to be. But neither is he an idealist.

Following Jesse's lead into a discussion of personal rather than ideological matters, Celine asks him about those "deeper" problems. Flash back to Vienna, on a city train, when he answered a similar question with, "You, probably," briefly acknowledging for the first time his romantic

interest in her and the complications that could ensue. This time he answers differently. He claims to have *no* problems at this particular moment, ignoring the “deeper” problems of which he hinted only moments ago. “I’m just damned happy to be here,” meaning with Celine. It’s as if their recent argument about the evils of the world were forgotten. Celine reciprocates, “Me too.” Neither admits openly they are thrilled to be together again, but their meaning is clear anyway. Close-ups of both characters reinforce the point beautifully. Jesse silently stares at Celine. But then she looks down, avoiding his direct gaze. Generally speaking, Jesse is more aggressive about hinting at a renewal of their romance. We have yet to learn why she is reluctant, and why that reluctance is valid.

Celine, clothing their moment of naked emotion, inquires how long Jesse has been in Paris. Nice, safe, unemotional topic. The camera too cuts to a more distant view. The frosted glass obscures passersby outside the restaurant, focusing our attention inside. Jesse complains he’s “tired of being a huckster” after making ten book promotion stops in twelve days. Is that true? Or is he just trying to appeal to Celine’s social conscience, especially in the wake of her implied accusation that all he cares about is the financial success of his book.

Celine helps Jesse order coffee from the French-speaking waitress. Again his language handicap is on display. But because they are not in the midst of a disagreement, she doesn’t insult him about it and he doesn’t feel defensive. On the contrary, Jesse remarks that he loves this Parisian restaurant and wishes New York had more like it. Celine agrees, adding that she missed Paris while living in New York. Her implied preference for Paris does not provoke another culture clash between them because Jesse is much more interested in the news that she lived in New York, studying at New York University, from 1996 to 1998. It frustrates him

greatly to realize that in 1998, when he too resided in New York, neither knew they lived in such close proximity, giving them another reason to regret not exchanging contact information in Vienna.

Celine eventually left New York because her student visa expired, and more importantly because she was getting paranoid about crime in the city and violence (notably a disturbing fascination with serial killers) in American media. After an intruder incident near her apartment, a policeman advised her to purchase a gun for protection. "This is America, not France" he cautioned her. Then he pulled out his own gun to illustrate his point. And he did so, she adds, while his *female* partner was downstairs and he was alone with Celine. It's a not-so-subtle dig at men and their fascination with guns. Afraid for her safety, Celine applied for a gun permit. Changing her mind later, she cancelled the application, filed a complaint against the policeman and soon thereafter returned to France.

Celine's claim that she never forgot her frightening experience with guns in New York is met with a trace of sarcasm from Jesse. The old tension is rising. Yet she tries, if rather lamely, to balance out her anti-American views by insisting there are many things she misses about Jesse's native land. When pressed to name them, however, she struggles to come up with a list. She praises the "overall good mood" of Americans; yet adds a qualifier, "even if it can be bullshit sometimes." Equally suspect is her exaggerated reenactment of two Americans jovially greeting one another. But she does better when contrasting American friendliness with what she describes as the general grumpiness of Parisians. Supplied with such a golden opportunity to criticize the French and by implication defend his fellow Americans, Jesse politely declines. He plays it safe, for the time being.

Celine narrows her critique of the French to *men* only. The lurking culture war becomes a gender war, though this time not necessarily between Celine and Jesse. She complains that French men are not as interested in sex as she would like them to be. "Horny" is the specific, curiously American term she employs. Surprised and amused at the nature of Celine's complaint about her countrymen, Jesse takes swift advantage of the opening she gives him, proclaiming himself proud of his very active, typically American sex drive. Whether in Vienna or Paris, he seldom misses an opportunity to inject the topic of sex into their conversation. But this time Celine does it for him. He merely follows her lead. "And so you should be" declares Celine, amused at his boldness. But then she slyly adds, "In that regard only." The culture divide between them is not entirely forgotten, even at this moment of relative harmony as they attempt to get reacquainted.

A man sitting by himself at a table behind our couple, and never shown in sharp focus, pays little attention to his neighbors. He glances in their direction when they laugh about France's lack of horny men, then at the waitress when she returns, but quickly turns back to his own affairs. We, the film audience, are the only people who care much about what transpires between Jesse and Celine. They are an island of two in the big city.

Celine inquires if Jesse has ever been to Eastern Europe. Still embarrassed about his lack of familiarity with other cultures, he admits not. Is she implicitly bragging about her superior geographical sophistication? Does he mistakenly perceive it that way? Speaking of her trip to Poland as a teenager, Celine offhandedly remarks that she doesn't like communism. "Oh, yeah, sure you don't" Jesse mutters under his breath. His quick verbal jab strikes home. Celine protests earnestly that she doesn't. They are close to replaying the argument they had while approaching

the restaurant, until Jesse claims he was just kidding and Celine seems to take him at his word. But maybe it was his little retaliation for the perceived, whether or not intended, insult to Jesse's inferior cultural experience, or for her previous "in that regard only" remark. Every topic of conversation between these two characters is charged with an extra layer of meaning rooted in their strong feelings for each other. It's a tricky game that if not handled well can easily degenerate into nasty name-calling.

According to Celine, the depressing social atmosphere in Warsaw brought clarity to her thinking and writing. The lack of Western commercial distractions encouraged her to explore new ideas in her journal, like a nearly penniless Jesse pondering his cable TV show while riding trains through Europe. Jesse unwisely interrupts with a sarcastic slam: "Communist ideas?" He launched a similar insult earlier, but she accepted his excuse ("Just kidding") for doing so and continued on with her story as though he was sincerely interested in it. She obviously wants to share with an important personal experience from her past, as she did in Vienna when they visited the Cemetery of the No-Names. He respected her story on that occasion. But this time the unresolved tension between them impels them to snipe at each other. He disrupts her attempt at intimacy by reviving their political argument from before the restaurant: an argument fuelled, in turn, by unresolved animosity stemming from their failure to reunite in Vienna.

Celine protests, again. Jesse, hands held up in conciliation, apologizes, again. Celine's self-revelatory tale resumes, *again*, but only after a retaliatory snipe about consigning Jesse to a gulag. Though only for a moment, and accompanied by disarming laughter, Celine plays the Communist boogeyman to the wise-cracking, Commie-fearing American. She adopts a *pose* of the ruthless power of Stalinism to fight back against the reactionary *pose* of her companion.

These two characters have a long way to go before reaching the level of mutual trust they attained at the end of *Before Sunrise*.

Elaborating on the emotional and intellectual liberation of being a stranger in a strange land, Celine describes her freedom from the “consuming frenzy” she normally associates with the capitalist West. Boredom became instead a “soulful” experience. That’s not strictly communism, which in theory is very much concerned with the fulfillment of material needs, but rather a kind of idealistic flirtation with it. Curiously her sojourn in communist Warsaw emotionally resembles Jesse’s retreat to a monastery, which he will soon describe to her. Both experiences suggest a need to escape from themselves. But because neither character is feeling secure enough yet, they are less than receptive to the private revelations of the other.

“It’s interesting, no?” Celine declares and inquires simultaneously. Jesse’s honest answer would probably be “No.” Instead he abruptly changes the subject to a topic of far greater interest to him at the moment: the simple, astonishing fact that it’s been nine years since they explored Vienna together. Sometimes two people, no matter how close they are or how strongly they feel about each other, are just not intellectually or emotionally in the same place at the same time. Fortunately for Jesse, Celine is willing to pick up the loose end of his new conversational thread. Or maybe it’s not so fortunate. “Do I look any different?” she asks. Now *there’s* the verbal equivalent of a loaded gun. Jesse hesitates. Of course she looks nine years older than she was in Vienna, though still beautiful. But Jesse cannot say that, so he avoids the question by turning it into a joke. “I’d have to see you naked.” Back to sex, Jesse’s all-purpose safety net. Celine laughs, mildly shocked but not offended. How could she be? She claimed earlier to prefer her men “horny.”

Escaping the embarrassment of his “naked” remark, which was perhaps only a delaying tactic anyway, Jesse notes the change in Celine’s hair style. Re-living old times, he asks her to let it down, as she wore it in Vienna. She consents. Jesse hesitates responding, again. She demands it. He sidesteps the obvious fact that she’s as attractive as ever, perhaps because it’s too soon for them to make themselves romantically vulnerable again. He comments instead, “Skinnier.” It’s not a very flattering term, though he may have intended it to be. “Thinner” sounds better. But neither word would please an insecure Celine, who manages to transform a lame compliment into a backhanded insult. Did Jesse think she was *fat* in Vienna? That she goes on and on about the notion betrays how much it bothers her, despite the fact that Jesse neither said nor implied she was formerly fat. So much for Celine’s high-minded, non-materialistic Polish holiday. We’re not in Warsaw any more, Toto. Jesse tries to make amends by telling her what he should have said in the first place. That she’s beautiful.

Jesse too wants to know if he’s changed since Vienna, which is another way of asking if her feelings for him have changed. “No,” Celine lies. In fact he too looks older, more so than she does. Pressed for details, she points to a deep wrinkle on his brow. “It’s like a scar” she adds. Is she retaliating for his skinnier-equals-formerly-fat comment? If so, she hits the mark. Jesse reacts as emotionally as she did. And by re-defining “scar” as “like a gunshot wound” he unwittingly equates her supposed insult with the popular method of American violence she criticized minutes ago. What a complicated relationship these two have, recycling bits of previous conversations into later discussions.

Celine bemoans the aging process like we all do from time to time (sitting in front of the computer right now, my lower back hurts the way it never used to!). Not in extreme terms, but

enough to betray growing concern about it. Jesse counters that he likes getting older because he can appreciate things more now. His glance at Celine tells us exactly *whom* he appreciates at this particular moment. Celine pretends to agree with his general statement, but it sounds perfunctory. She raises her hand to tuck her hair behind one ear. Covering up her disagreement?

Defending his claim about appreciating things more with age, Jesse remembers playing drums in a rock band as a young man. Back then everyone in the band was obsessed with getting a record contract, which never happened. Now that the band no longer exists, he insists he could better enjoy the experience for what it was instead of regretting what it wasn't. Listening to Jesse, Celine lights up a cigarette. He bums a drag from it. They smoke? That's a new development since Vienna. Have they cultivated new bad habits to cope with old regrets? That would seem to contradict Jesse's claim that he enjoys getting older.

Following up on his comments, Celine inquires if Jesse enjoys his success as a published author as much as he claims he would now enjoy the simple experience of performing in a rock band. "Not really" he admits. They share a laugh at his inconsistency. Maybe getting older isn't as much fun as he claimed. Celine adds her own example of disappointment that comes with age and experience. She's a frustrated social activist. Appreciating *small* achievements, being in the *moment*, are the keys to happiness, she insists.

Our couple is off on another of their stimulating, passionate, somewhat philosophical discussions. Jesse takes the ball from Celine and runs with it, admitting that he is never completely satisfied with life, yet believes that desire itself fuels our passion to live. Wanting nothing, lacking the ambition for more, is not the key to happiness. He refines rather than contradicts Celine's point about being happy with small achievements.

Celine concurs. Both reject what they consider the Buddhist ideal of attaining contentment by freeing one's self from all desires. Equating the lack of desire with mental depression, she goes so far as to laud the desire for so trivial a thing as a new pair of shoes. So much for liberating herself from the distraction of shopping, as in Communist Warsaw. The philosophical inconsistency of both characters throughout all three films is not so much a measure of their hypocrisy, though they are occasionally guilty of it (remember Celine humorously accusing Jesse of exactly that after his little sermon about false "romantic projections" in Vienna) as it is of the genuine complexity of the topics they discuss and the inevitable impact of *mood* on their convictions. What's so exhilarating about Jesse and Celine is that they so obviously *enjoy* their passionate and sometimes contentious conversations.

Jesse backtracks a little from his original statement about desire, renewing a slight tension between his own views and Celine's, by claiming it's okay to want things as long as you don't get too upset if you don't get them. "Life's hard. It's supposed to be. If we didn't suffer, we wouldn't learn a thing." A moral lesson glibly offered, it's easy to say, less so to experience. Is this Jesse's attempt to justify the suffering he experienced after Celine failed to meet him in Vienna? Or is he simply forgetting how discouraging it was for him in the aftermath of that crushing disappointment?

"Are you a Buddhist or something?" Celine inquires in a challenging manner. She is confused by Jesse's mixed views on desire. Now, according to him, it's the *frustration* of desire that teaches valuable, character-building lessons. Isn't that the point Celine herself made when describing her trip to Warsaw? A point now apparently forgotten by both characters, who use this abstract discussion to work out pre-existing tensions between them.

Both characters agree that neither is committed to any specific religion. Celine admits she is no longer “open” to all religious ideas either, which is a change in her attitude since Vienna. But then Jesse describes his visit to a Trappist monastery where the monks seemed content with very little. Nobody was “hustling” anybody else--the same word with which he earlier described his book promotion tour. So despite his claim to be non-religious, Jesse has flirted with a brand of Catholicism in the same way Celine flirted with Communism: perhaps both from the sheer exhaustion of being full of unfulfilled desires, including for the past nine years the frustration of wanting and wondering what it would have been like to be with each other.

In a cathedral back in Vienna, Celine admitted her attraction to a place where so many people come to seek relief from suffering. Then Jesse told a contrary story about his atheist friend and a homeless person as evidence that many expressions of faith are fraudulent. This time *Celine* plays the spoiler after Jesse’s complimentary story about monastic life. She tells a little tale about her handsome ex-boyfriend who yearned to become a Buddhist, visited a Buddhist monastery in Asia and was sexually propositioned by a monk. So much for the purity of spiritual life, she implies.

Before Celine delivers the punch line to her story, Jesse interrupts to say that he too thought about becoming a Buddhist. Pouncing on that disclosure, Celine says she’s going to tell him why he should, then finishes her blow-job joke. They share a laugh. These two characters are perfect foils for each other’s intellectual susceptibilities: currently his for religion and hers for Communism.

Jesse flatters Celine by telling her he admires the work she’s doing. Protecting herself from the insult she suspects is coming, Celine sabotages it with the same cynical remark she used to mock

his spiritual quest. "Sucking cock?" Both characters are feeling a little shell-shocked after exchanging verbal jabs at each other's sacred cows. But after laughing off Celine's cynical remark, Jesse presses on with his original point. He admires her willingness to be passionately engaged with life instead of detached from it. Genuinely flattered this time, she shyly accepts his praise. For once they do not slip and slide their way into another argument.

Speaking of action versus passivity, Jesse proposes a little sightseeing before he has to leave for the airport. Celine can be his native guide. He pays the restaurant tab and leaves a generous tip. His financial situation has improved since Vienna. And he makes no insults about poor European customer service this time. In fact the only person who has made derogatory comments about Parisians is Celine.

Informed that today is Sale Day in Paris, when everything is discounted, Jesse suggests they go shopping. He assumes that's what Celine wants to do because she brought it up. He's trying to be accommodating, probably faking an enthusiasm for the activity she proposed. But he misreads her. Dismissing Sale Day as "madness," Celine suggests instead they walk to a nearby public garden. Jesse, of course, likes that "better," as he would have claimed regardless of what she proposed. Couples are less inclined to be so deceptively accommodating to each other's wishes as time goes by, as we shall see in *Before Midnight*.

Shopping and walking through gardens are equally beside the point. Jesse wants to spend time with Celine and perhaps eventually discuss with her what's really on his mind: namely, what happened between them in Vienna, what *didn't* happen between them six months later and what *will* happen between them in the future. Celine undoubtedly wishes for the same conversation, but with reservations we don't know about yet.

Switch to an extreme long shot view from almost overhead, just around the corner from the restaurant. At foreground screen left a man with a backpack rushes past us. Is he a student going somewhere in a hurry: to class or to meet a girlfriend? On the street far below other pedestrians pass by, into and out of the camera frame, each on his or her own mission, as the camera follows Jesse and Celine. In size they look like the other, anonymous characters in this shot. But by allowing their voices to dominate the soundtrack, Linklater reminds us of our privileged connection to them.

So eager is Jesse to solicit Celine's good graces that after announcing his preference for a garden walk over shopping he adds, "not that I wouldn't do whatever you wanted." Imagine a husband saying *that* to his spouse after twenty years of marriage! Jesse is so agreeable because he wants something from Celine, and it's not merely sex. She, not even noticing his eagerness to be agreeable, is too busy back-peddling from her comment about Sale Day, as though embarrassed to admit she likes shopping.

Jesse continues his ingratiating efforts by telling Celine a therapist would approve of her shopping desires. She appreciates his effort to ease her sense of guilt, then asks Jesse if *he* is in therapy. It's a reasonable assumption since he brought up the topic. But his reaction is a little defensive. Maybe he *has* been in therapy and doesn't want to admit it because it would make him vulnerable to her in a way he doesn't want to be. "Do I *seem* like I'm in therapy?" he asks a bit too eagerly, as though he were really asking, "Do you think I'm crazy?" "I'm kidding" she soothes, which is the same thing Jesse said a couple times earlier when he asked questions that irritated Celine. Neither character is in attack mode at present, yet the tenor of their relationship changes from moment to moment. Hold onto your hats.

Celine and Jesse briefly pass out of view beneath the stairwell. For a moment they are one with the other anonymous characters we've seen pass in and out of the camera frame during this shot. Then a new shot brings them back into view, at closer range this time.

Pursuing the therapy topic Jesse introduced, Celine jokingly asks if it's helped with his sexual problems. Perhaps she is merely referring to the stereotypical view of psychiatric therapy as solely concerned with sex, and not to a specific problem of Jesse's. In either case, he takes the bait more seriously than she intended, so she backs off again. "I'm kidding" she repeats. That's becoming a common response for both characters. Jesse, still defending himself against what he seems to think is Celine's challenge to his sexual prowess, points out the two of them had no sexual problems in Vienna. Celine, dropping her affable smile and deliberately walking away from Jesse, insists they never had sex that night. Those of us familiar with *Before Sunrise* cannot say which of them is telling the truth, or remembering accurately, since we discretely left their alleged sex scene before we saw anything conclusive.

In *Before Sunrise* a few trivial remarks by Jesse and Celine about a gypsy palm reader eventually, unwittingly triggered an argument between them. In this scene an innocent joke by Celine backfires on both she and Jesse when it triggers a dispute about an event that occurred nine years earlier. She did not anticipate such a development when she made that joke.

When Celine separates herself from Jesse, the camera changes position from backtracking with them to following them from behind. This visual change in perspective reflects an abrupt change in their attitudes. Jesse is no longer willing to accommodate Celine's every whim. And Celine is no longer "just kidding." He insists they had sex in Vienna. Talking very fast, often an indication that she is upset, she vigorously denies it.

Another reversal of camera angle occurs as disagreement descends rapidly into nasty argument. There is no even keel in their relationship. Pitting her private journal account of their night in Vienna against Jesse's fictionalized version, Celine taps into an earlier conversation they had in order to drive home her point. "That's what I meant, you idealizing the night!" Using a prior dispute as a weapon in a later one is something we all do, even when the first one has presumably been resolved or faded into insignificance. Apparently *nothing* is ever completely forgotten. Any incident, no matter how trivial, can reappear at any time, with renewed passion, for good or ill.

Jesse tries reasoning his way to victory by recalling the brand of condom they used. "That's disgusting! I don't want to hear it!" protests Celine. One of them is mistaken, either remembering incorrectly or flat out lying. Celine's violent reaction to Jesse's claim may be her desperate avoidance of what she knows to be the truth. But if that is true, why would she? She and Jesse are no longer working out their private differences through abstract discussions about politics, culture and gender. They're dueling on private ground now.

As we backtrack with the couple, our focus is so narrowly on their combative conversation that it's easy to overlook the beautiful garden through which they stroll: the garden that was intended by them to be a pleasant backdrop to the renewal of their acquaintance. Jesse and Celine too are oblivious of their surroundings, as they sometimes but not always were in Vienna. The best laid plans often go awry.

Jesse is flabbergasted by Celine's denial of what is for him a treasured memory. Their long-delayed reunion could end here and now, as their journey in Vienna almost did on several occasions. Until Celine's denial softens just enough to let in a glimmer of reconciliation. She

doesn't validate Jesse's claim, but she does equivocate, admitting a trace of doubt about her memory of the event. In an effort to jog that recollection, she asks Jesse if they had sex in the Viennese cemetery they visited. It's a false, perhaps even a faked memory almost as upsetting to Jesse as was her outright denial. What was so memorable for him apparently meant very little to her. Remember their conversation, in a Vienna nightclub while playing pinball, about recent romantic break-ups? Jesse observed bitterly that their former lovers were as indifferent to the pain they caused Jesse and Celine as Celine and Jesse were to the pain suffered by former lovers *they* dumped. Right now he is feeling like the one who got dumped, making him doubt everything he thought they shared in Vienna and clearly hopes they can share again.

Frustrated and annoyed, Jesse tries to jog Celine's memory by properly placing their lovemaking in the park late at night rather than the cemetery in the afternoon. Celine grudgingly admits it probably happened that way. Not quite a ringing endorsement of Jesse's version, but better than denial or indifference. Sometimes it's less painful, she excuses herself, to hide things away in drawers "inside my head" than to "live with it." Hopeful again, Jesse inquires if their night in Vienna is a "sad" memory for her. If he can believe it is, he'll know it meant and still means something to her, which would make *him* feel better about it. Celine tries to avoid such an admission by transforming her specific point into a more generic, emotionally distant one. It's not a convincing performance, but understandable as a defensive maneuver.

After covering his face with his hands in consternation during Celine's remark about hiding memories in "drawers," Jesse is heartened by the possibility that she remembers Vienna as vividly and passionately as does he. Her sadness makes him happy, because it means their recollections of and feelings about Vienna were in harmony all those years they were apart.

He wasn't merely some "dumb American momentarily decorating your blank canvass" as he once joked. Pressing his advantage, Jesse tells her he remembers everything about their evening together. No shrinking from the painful truth this time. Yet only a few short scenes ago he denied ever returning to Vienna to reconnect with Celine, because it made him seem vulnerable. In this scene it's Celine's turn to play that game, with unpleasant consequences.

A wonderful, open smile returns to Celine's face as she finally admits that she too remembers everything about their evening in Vienna--or at least most of it. She laughs at the one glaring exception. In a surprising turn of events their nearly disastrous argument about whether or not they had sex has broken through their earlier reluctance to discuss their painful, shared past. Celine once said, after a vigorous argument in Vienna, "There's a lot of good things coming out of conflict." This time, yes. But arguments don't always clear the air between these two characters. Sometimes they exacerbate differences and promote misunderstanding.

More relaxed with each other again (does it seem sunnier too?), our couple converse less defensively, but not without emotional shields. Celine blames her mental lapse about sex on the death of her grandmother the very day she was supposed to reunite with Jesse in Vienna. He can't top that, so he returns to his earlier accommodation. "It was a tough day for me, but it must have been worse for you." Maybe he's not merely accommodating Celine on this occasion, because it's the truth.

Just *how* tough a day it was for Celine comes out now. Seeing her grandmother's corpse in its coffin made her realize how permanently removed she now was from the warm, loving person who held her as a child. That, in turn, reminded her that she would likely never see Jesse again either. Two terrible losses occurred in one day, each fuelling the other. Her mind fought back,

for survival's sake, reducing the emotional significance of her one-night relationship with Jesse. She was, and to some extent still is, a woman divided against herself. Coincidentally, Celine's painful revelation occurs while a young woman dressed like her, with similarly long hair and also carrying a purse, walks past her going in the opposite direction. The stranger is ignorant of and indifferent to Celine's sad memories, yet serves as a visual metaphor of Celine parting ways with herself. As later events bear out, Celine still hasn't reconciled those divided selves.

Imagine the mixture of resentment and guilt Celine must have experienced on that sad day: resenting her grandmother for deserting her and for preventing her reunion with Jesse, resenting Jesse for distracting her from grieving the loss of her beloved grandmother, knowing both acts of resentment were unjustified and feeling guilty about it. I'm just speculating on a possible explanation for why she repressed the memory of having sex with Jesse.

Now it emerges, because Celine is at last ready to admit it and make herself vulnerable, that she has long been depressed about her broken reunion with Jesse. Reading his new book reminded her how hopeful she was that summer of 1994, anticipating their December rendezvous. "Memory is a wonderful thing if you don't have to deal with the past" she remarks. Jesse laughs, suggesting her comment is fit for a bumper sticker. Careful. Is he making fun of *her* writing skills? Luckily for him Celine is too happy at present to take it as an insult. By reuniting in Paris, she points out, they can change their sad memories of December 1994. "A memory is never finished as long as you're alive" offers Jesse in the same spirit. He chuckles to himself. Is he deriding his own literary skills? Mocking Celine's? Still, his remark touches on a point made again and again in Linklater's trilogy. Memories are pliable commodities, bending to immediate emotional needs, subject to confusion and error, likely to differ between two individuals who

experienced an event together.

Only minutes after obstinately denying she ever had sex with Jesse, Celine is ready and willing to reveal intimate details of her private life to him. Even embarrassing details that may make her seem foolish. Trust between these two characters is re-building. Celine recalls a false childhood memory of being sexually accosted by a dirty old man on a Paris street late at night. She believes the source of that delusion was her mother's paranoia about letting her walk home alone after piano lessons. Even now Celine equates sex with that frightening walk home. Flash back to Jesse's comment in Vienna, during their walk through the amusement park, about some parents teaching their children the wrong things and thereby causing them problems later in life.

Jesse reacts to Celine's confession with a joke. "Is that street nearby? Could we . . .?" I doubt he's seriously proposing a resumption of their sexual relationship, especially in the wake of Celine's disturbing story? More likely he's just trying to lighten Celine's mood by making her laugh? He's always been skilled at that, and she does laugh. But she also adds, "No. Very *far*" while looking away from Jesse yet simultaneously fiddling with her hair. Is she sending him mixed signals of rejection and flirtation? Did she perceive Jesse's joke as a genuine proposal of sex? The gap between intention and perception is always a potential problem in human communication, no matter how familiar two people are with each other.

Jesse looked away from Celine after making his amusing but potentially insensitive remark about sex. She did the same while responding. They face each other again as Celine re-directs their conversation to a new topic, asking if Jesse ever kept a journal as a child. His reply is vague. Evidently it was not as important an activity for him as it clearly was for her. Celine tells him she recently re-read a journal entry from twenty years ago, long before she met Jesse, and

realizes she was essentially the same person back then as she is now, at least in terms of how she sees and deals with life.

Childhood journals may be of little interest to Jesse, but he chimes in enthusiastically on the topic of innate, unchanging personality traits. Celine's conclusions result from personal observation while Jesse prefers to generalize from less personal sources. Instead of a private journal he read an academic study that concluded people retain their fundamental attitudes and outlooks regardless of changes in their situation. Celine half-jokingly applies Jesse's theory of human nature to her own life, speculating that she will always be depressed even if great things happen to her. Without discarding his general theory, he challenges her basic assumption that she is by nature depressed. "Are you depressed now?" She admits not. Yet Jesse supported his original claim by citing the example of a person who won the lottery, but six months later had the same outlook on life he had before becoming wealthy. So asking Celine if she's depressed right now, in the midst of their unexpected and mostly happy reunion, does not necessarily predict what she will feel like a year or two down the road, even if they become a long-term couple. We'll have to wait for *Before Midnight* to see how the future answers that question.

Celine expresses concern that when she reaches the end of her life she'll regret not having done all she wanted to do, including painting, playing guitar every day, learning Chinese and writing more songs. Her comment echoes something Jesse told her nine years earlier, about wanting to accomplish something important with his life beyond just being a good husband and father, and fearing the latter entanglements might interfere with the former aspirations. Is Celine unconsciously repeating a concern Jesse expressed long ago? Has she reached a similar conclusion independently? Or is she now, and for that matter was Jesse then, erecting emotional

barriers to romantic fulfillment in order to immunize herself from painful disappointment in that arena? Both characters have felt unfulfilled for so long that it would be understandable.

Perhaps trying to reassure Celine, Jesse asks if she believes in ghosts, spirits, God or reincarnation. She says no. He seems nonplussed, as though unsure how to help her if she doesn't believe in some sort of afterlife. Does neither of them recollect their conversations about these topics in Vienna? It's as if they've switched roles, Jesse now playing the mystic and Celine the skeptic. She claims she wants to believe in *some* sort of magic. He fires back, "Astrology!" They laugh at the thought. Nine years ago they were less in sync, or amused, as they argued over the credibility of palm reading.

Celine quotes Albert Einstein about the need to believe in some kind of "magic or mystery." Jesse concurs, but adds in a rather existential vein that he personally doesn't sense a place for himself in that mystical world and therefore feels an urgency to make the most of *this* life. His remark again sends us back to Vienna, where he told Celine that after discovering his father didn't want him to be born he felt he didn't really belong in the world. Putting a positive spin on paternal rejection, he claimed he felt like he was crashing a big party, and that "my life was my own doing." Maybe he still feels that way, even if he explains it now in different terms.

Picking up on the same thought, but with her own experiences in mind, Celine tells Jesse she phones her mother for reassurance when she feels depressed. But then her mother typically overreacts, worrying that her daughter is deathly ill or suicidal. She and Jesse share a laugh, reducing the whole gloomy topic to manageable proportions.

A reversal in camera angle accompanies an abrupt change in conversational direction. "So, what about us?" asks Celine. Is this it? Are they finally going to confront the question of their

future together as a couple after an accidental nine-year hiatus? “What *about* us?” Jesse responds, puzzled or maybe misunderstanding the point of her question. Celine then either retreats from facing the core concern beneath all of their banter thus far, or she never meant to face it and I misinterpreted her initial inquiry. “No, what I mean is . . .” is either clarification or obfuscation.

In a Viennese restaurant Celine created the fictitious scenario of she and Jesse phoning best friends in order to safely solicit and reveal their impressions of each other. Now she invents the fiction of this being her and Jesse’s last day on earth in order to solicit his thoughts and feelings on their possible future together. Would they, she wonders aloud, talk about his book or the environment under such dire circumstances, implying that both topics are trivial compared to what’s really on their minds. “What would you tell me?” In effect she’s asking Jesse to make the first romantic commitment, as they tried to get each other to do when their time together grew short in Vienna. Nine years ago they almost talked themselves out of admitting they wanted to continue their acquaintance, and did talk each other out of exchanging contact information that could have saved their reunion plans.

Jesse admits he’d ditch his book and the environment but retain “magic and the universe.” Yet he predictably avoids being the first to confess his hopes and dreams about their future together by substituting marathon sex in a hotel room as their final, glorious act on earth. Equally flirtatious, Celine trumps him by suggesting they skip the hotel room and do it on a nearby park bench—the first acknowledgement by either character of their pleasant garden surroundings.

Calling Celine’s bluff, Jesse grabs her by the hand and pulls her to the apocalyptic bench, planting her on his lap. He wins. She backs off, withdrawing her fictional ploy, deserting his lap

and sitting more discretely beside him. He apologizes, as he often does after acting or speaking impulsively. Celine admits her hypothetical was too extreme to foster the communication she was seeking. So she pursues another route, using the example of a different couple who a year into their relationship tried but failed to openly discuss the topic of sexual gratification. The woman made what she thought were helpful suggestions for improvement. The man felt threatened and inadequate. Jesse's first reaction is to defend the man by suggesting the woman should have expressed her dissatisfaction earlier. Celine defends the woman by accusing all men of being too easily offended about sex. *Our* couple unwittingly proves the point Celine tried to make within her safe story about the anonymous couple: that communication even between veteran lovers can be difficult. Again there was a mismatch between intention and perception. Worse yet, sometimes misunderstanding can be willful on the part of one or both partners.

Celine claims that men are more easily offended about sex. Jesse seems not to agree. But he does concur that men are easier to please sexually. Celine anonymous friend came up with the idea of a detailed questionnaire to determine her lover's preferences. The hypothetical speculation that ensues between Celine and Jesse may in fact be a frank exchange of information about their own likes and dislikes. Celine asks her hypothetical boyfriend, Jesse, if he likes S and M. Then, posing as that boyfriend, she provides a hypothetical answer to her own question: "No, but a good spanking once in a while doesn't hurt." Is she providing Jesse with useful information in case he becomes her future lover? After all, they've only had sex twice, both times on the same night. They still have much to learn about each other. Or maybe it's just her way of flirting. But their conversation has certainly advanced since its awkward beginning in and just outside the bookshop.

Jesse plays along with Celine's sexy version of Q and A. "Do you like talking dirty in bed?" Celine, having already answered her own question about S and M games, turns the spotlight back on Jesse, asking for his opinion of the "dirty" word "pussy." He unabashedly replies that he loves it. But very quickly this type of flirtation becomes for too candid for comfort, especially for two people who are no longer and not yet again lovers. They beat a hasty retreat into humor, reducing the topic of sexual preferences to a joke and each other to "pervert" and "ho." They also avoid looking at each other as they veer away from that kind of intimacy.

Unconsciously reliving another experience from Vienna, Jesse lays one of his arms on the back of the bench, behind Celine's shoulders. He doesn't touch her, but he comes close, as he did on a Viennese train nine years ago while they were deeply engaged in another of their stimulating conversations. In many though not all respects they're starting over the difficult task of bridging the space between them that Celine once spoke about. How would Linklater, Delpy and Hawke have portrayed the relationship between Celine and Jesse if *Before Sunset* had picked it up six months after *Before Sunrise*, with a reunion that had occurred as scheduled. How much awkwardness would the characters have had to overcome, compared to the barriers that grew between them after nine years apart?

Jesse rescues them from embarrassment by diverting their discussion to the new topic of Celine's songwriting. Seems like a good idea, focusing on *her* creative achievements since they've already discussed his. He asks her to sing one of her songs for him. It seems a reasonable, complimentary request. Yet Celine adamantly refuses. Is she afraid he'll make a joke of something so important to her? Are her songs too personal and revealing to be shared with him yet? Whatever Celine's reason for denying his request, Jesse is slightly offended. He

snidely offers to return to the same park bench in six months time to hear her perform, whether or not she shows up with her guitar. Now that's passive aggression. And it only required a moment of irritation for Jesse to reach back into their bag of mutual resentments and pull out a weapon he *knows* can hurt Celine. By admitting earlier that she deeply regrets her failure to meet him in Vienna, she made herself emotionally vulnerable to him. And now he takes cruel advantage of that vulnerability. It's not a sustained, all-out attack. It's just a little jab. But it hurts her, and sometimes little insults can linger in the mind of the victim, festering resentments and returning to haunt later conversations—even conversations having nothing directly to do with the origin of the insult.

“Okay, that's funny” replies Celine dismissively. She is not amused by Jesse's backhanded insult. Standing up, she leaves behind their shared park bench and its atmosphere of intimacy, insisting it's time to get Jesse back to the bookstore so he can catch his flight out of Paris. Taking him by the hand, she pulls a reluctant Jesse to his feet and leads him towards the Seine River and a parting of the ways. Like a couple of tense occasions in Vienna, this could easily be the end of any unspoken hopes either may have of a future together. A jogger runs by, going in the same direction. He takes little notice of them and they take none of him. Will they soon be indifferent strangers to each other as well?

Pursuing an emotionally safer topic than sex, songwriting and broken promises, Celine asks Jesse where he's headed by plane. New York, he answers. A moment of awkward silence follows. Clearly Jesse wanted to continue the process of getting reacquainted. He's disappointed by her most recent rejection of that process. Celine now raises a topic that perhaps betrays her *real* reason for pulling away from him—a reason far more compelling than his latest insult about

her failure to meet him in Vienna. Probably the reason she's been more emotionally distant than he has ever since they met in the bookshop.

Deceptively nonchalant, she mentions having read that Jesse is married and has a child. When Jesse confirms it, she responds with a fake smile and an equally insincere "That's great." Has she avoided romantic commitment and marriage these past nine years in the hope, however farfetched, of meeting Jesse again? Did Jesse, in her eyes, betray their Vienna romance, despite *her* failure to show up for the second act, by not doing the same? Love and Reason do not always keep company. Or maybe Celine didn't avoid commitment and marriage post-Vienna. Maybe she just never found the right man, and now resents the fact that Jesse apparently found the right woman. There are lots of possibilities here, spread out like a minefield between these two characters. They'll have to step carefully if they are to meet in the middle.

Jesse talks affectionately about his four year old son, Hank. He describes his wife, an elementary teacher, in less glowing though not yet hostile terms, giving Celine no clear reason to think his marriage is troubled. When he inquires if Celine has any children, she defensively makes a joke of it. Claiming two, she pretends to recollect in horror that she left them in a car, with the window rolled up, six months ago. They share a laugh, but what a painful little joke it is, trying to conceal while in fact betraying Celine's disappointment at failing to achieve the private and professional success she believes Jesse has achieved. At this point in their reunion, Jesse seems to have bounced back from their Vienna reunion failure much better than has Celine.

As he and Celine descend a stairway towards the Seine, Jesse hops onto the metal railing that divides them and rides it down part ways. Perhaps it's his fidgety way of distracting himself from the anxiety underlying a dialog that, for all he knows, is fast approaching its conclusion.

Celine answers Jesse's question about children more seriously now. She wants to have them some day but isn't ready yet. Standard answer, but is it an honest one? As if to match Jesse's happy family life, the underlying truth of which has yet to be disclosed, Celine paints one of her own. She tells him she's in a good relationship with a photojournalist who covers wars. A brief expression of surprise, if not alarm, crosses Jesse's face. Celine doesn't notice it. Her current lover appears to fill the socially responsible criteria that Jesse, the self-centered novelist, does not. Score this conversational round a draw, except that neither character has told the whole truth about their supposed domestic bliss.

Celine's boyfriend is absent much of the time, she admits. But then she turns that deficit into an asset by pointing out that she is very busy. Career first, romance second? Jesse wonders if it's dangerous for her boyfriend to cover wars. Is that wishful thinking or a straightforward expression of concern for Celine's emotional welfare? Celine responds to it as the latter, admitting she worries about her lover's safety, in spite of his promises to be careful. Trust is returning to their conversation as Jesse and Celine walk briskly along the Seine. One example of that trust is Celine's veiled criticism of her boyfriend's obsessive professionalism, which sometimes detaches him emotionally from the suffering of the people he photographs. Only a short time ago she meant to *impress* Jesse with her lover's profession. And Jesse, only moments after pondering out loud the possibility of Celine's boyfriend getting injured or worse while covering a war, now comes to his rescue, claiming a journalist *needs* to be emotionally detached from his subject in order to do his job successfully. Spoken like a novelist. Celine remains troubled by the notion. "I could never do it" she insists. Has the photojournalist become a means for Jesse and Celine to duel with each other verbally over the topic of professional

ethics? Are they debating the concept of observer versus activist? Or is a gender dispute again?

With the camera now tracking Celine and Jesse in long shot, we get to see more of their current surroundings than we did the garden through which they strolled. It's a classic postcard, with the placid Seine River on a beautiful summer day, unmistakably Parisian buildings in the background, strolling pedestrians and a few pigeons. A large tour boat is about to depart.

Whether responding to the romance of the scenery or making a bold move, like persuading her to get *off* the train with him in Vienna in order to prolong their journey together, Jesse coaxes a reluctant Celine *onto* the boat. This will take them in the opposite direction from where they were headed, and abort Celine's plan to return immediately to the bookshop so Jesse can catch his ride to the airport. Celine protests briefly that she's never been on such a boat, adding contemptuously that it's for *tourists*. How bourgeois! No self-respecting crusader for social justice would be caught dead on board such a cliché. But Jesse pleads and she finally concedes. Is it any more conventional than riding the big Ferris wheel in Vienna?

Jesse insists on paying their boat fare. It is, after all, *his* diversion. While doing so he turns to Celine and asks, "So, are you in love with that guy?" It's an impertinent question. As impertinent as if she had inquired, "So, do you love your wife?" when they discussed *his* marriage. Celine is momentarily confused. "What guy?" She thought that topic had been left behind in their rush to get on the boat. Jesse clarifies. Annoyed, Celine declares "Yes, of course." Is Jesse, after sensing tension in her romantic relationship when she admitted having qualms about her boyfriend's professional ethics, seeking a tactical advantage over Celine within their own tenuous relationship, casting doubt on her commitment to another man before admitting to her that his own marriage is in trouble? Apparently all is fair in love and war, especially when the

combatants are pressed for time.

A return to more pressing and mundane matters rescues them from another potential dispute. Jesse borrows Celine's cell phone to call his driver, Philippe, and inform him where to meet the boat. His dependency on Celine for the name and correct French pronunciation of that rendezvous point annoys her. "What's wrong with you!" she laughs in exasperation. Is she retaliating for his insensitive question about whether or not she loves her current boyfriend? In any case the old culture clash, dating back to their first minutes together in *Before Sunrise*, creeps back into their relationship, this time to Celine's advantage. They are playing on her home court. Jesse must be feeling like the "dumb American" again. But when he finally figures out the English translation of what Celine was trying to tell him in French, it's *his* turn to complain that she didn't translate the words into English in the first place, because the street in question is named after an *American* author! How quickly the worm turned. She apologizes, but no doubt enjoyed making him feel uncomfortable after he annoyed her.

We and the camera follow Celine from behind as she strolls through the boat's passenger cabin while Jesse, off screen, struggles to communicate with his French driver over her phone. Another couple leaves the open bow of the vessel. Celine picks that now vacant bow, away from the passenger seats and the canopy that shades them, as the best location for her next conversation with Jesse. She presents a rather bewitching silhouette as we follow her towards that small haven of privacy. After Jesse re-enters the film frame and joins her in the bow, we realize the camera was subjective from his point of view. We watched Celine from his visual and emotional perspective. No wonder she seemed so appealing. These two characters blow hot and cold about each other from moment to moment. There is no finality about them.

Celine reaches out to Jesse before he re-appears on screen. To take his hand? Is she extending a romantic invitation? No, she's just reaching for her cell phone, which Jesse returns. It was a nice thought, but premature. Nevertheless, she selected a part of the boat removed from other passengers, suggesting she still wants some degree of privacy with him. Two life preservers are attached to the boat's prow. Legally mandated and prudent, they are perhaps also symbolic of the romantic lifelines these two characters have yet to toss to each other during their complicated reunion. They are as reluctant to propose a romantic future together as they were in Vienna to propose continuing their relationship after its scheduled conclusion.

From near Jesse's point of view, we observe Notre Dame Cathedral slowly receding, framed by a blue sky and wispy clouds. Jesse tells the story of a German soldier who disobeyed orders to blow up the cathedral as the Nazis fled Paris near the end of World War Two. He also claims two other Parisian landmarks were spared by the same cross-cultural respect for beauty. Under questioning from Celine he admits the story might be apocryphal. But his fondness for Paris, Notre Dame and Celine (the *real* object of his story) seems sincere.

Without necessarily intending to be contrary, Celine points out that Notre Dame will be gone some day, and that another cathedral, which undoubtedly had admirers in *its* day, once occupied the location on which Notre Dame stands. Just as Jesse's romantic affections shifted away from Celine and settled on his wife? On a more conscious level she *enjoys* Jesse's appreciation of her city, admitting that she forgets how beautiful Paris is. She sincerely thanks Jesse for coaxing her onto the boat. For a moment her contempt for bourgeois tourism softens. Jesse, despite his flawed French and geographical provincialism, proves that sometimes being an outsider, even a "dumb American," can provide a fresh perspective of something all too familiar to a jaded

native. Is it possible that Celine, who seldom sings the praises of Jesse's native land, could point out something beautiful about the United States that Jesse takes for granted? If there is ever a sequel to *Before Midnight*, and that sequel is set in the United States, we might find out.

This is the first time, with the minor exception of Jesse's complimentary remarks about the restaurant in which they enjoyed coffee together, that these two characters have stopped talking about themselves and bothered to notice their surroundings, as they did more frequently, though not always, during their exploration of Vienna. Director Linklater's placement of the camera during this part of the scene allows us to see and feel the passing scenery as Jesse and Celine do. And that scenery is rendered more lyrical by the movement of the boat. Think of Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant taking a similar cruise on the Seine River in *Charade* (1963). Both voyages encourage intimacy between the main characters. But Audrey and Cary are caught up in an intrigue of theft, murder and deception. They have less time to explore each other.

Constructing a personal analogy out of his historical reference to Notre Dame, Jesse tells Celine he wrote his book in order to "build something" that would always remind him of their time together in Vienna. The mood between them has grown calm, trusting and open. The camera too cuts closer to them as they return to the topic of themselves.

Celine smiles warmly at Jesse's comment because it informs her that he too never forgot their passionate if brief past as a couple. With remarkable candor proceeding from growing trust, she admits to Jesse that romantic break-ups hurt her so much that in their wake she is always reluctant to get involved again. We've already seen evidence of that. She even avoids sexual relations because for her they inevitably lead to emotional involvement. For Celine the devil is in the details, including specific things she remembers about each of her former lovers. Even

while dawdling on her way to school as a little girl she become enthralled with what most people ignore: chestnuts falling from a tree, ants crossing a road and the shadow of a leaf. She fixates the same way about the people in her life. When a relationship falls apart, she misses many aspects of the person left behind. Jump forward for a moment to *Before Midnight*, in which an elderly widow says essentially the same thing about her deceased husband.

Jesse watches Celine intently as she speaks of these highly personal matters. No stupid sex jokes now. Like his, our attention pulls away from the passing background scenery and rivets on Celine. Remember when, laying in the grass in a park in Vienna, she reassured Jesse that her love would grow stronger, not weaker, as she became more and more familiar with her lover's little quirks and habits? She asserts the same thing now, though in more general terms. No wonder she was reluctant to accept Jesse's jocular offer to renew their sexual relationship. She would be risking too much, especially since she's known from the beginning of this conversational journey that he's married and has a child.

With considerable courage Celine segues from talking about painful recollections of her ex-lovers to a specific one about Jesse: the reddish glow of his beard on the morning they parted company in Vienna. "I remembered that and I missed it." Feeling vulnerable, she takes refuge in self-deprecating humor. "I'm really crazy, right?" is another of her statement/questions. Is she seeking reassurance from Jesse that she is *not* crazy for being inclined to love someone so thoroughly? He tries to provide that reassurance by claiming the real reason he wrote a book about their Vienna adventure was in hopes of attracting her attention and finding her again. Celine is skeptical, but appreciates his effort to match her passion. Jesse reiterates his claim. She challenges him by comparing his story to that of an old lady on her deathbed, fantasizing about

her youth. What old lady? Does she have someone specific in mind? And is she forgetting her own story, told to Jesse in Vienna, about her elderly grandmother confessing to her that during her entire marriage she was in love with a man who was not her husband?

Intimacy carries a price. By cutting so close to the heart of their romantic involvement in Vienna, Celine inadvertently renders their unintended nine-year separation all the more painful. Walking away from her, Jesse bitterly inquires why Celine didn't meet him as they had pre-arranged. Preceded by an impassioned "Oh, god!" for emphasis, it is probably more a rhetorical expression of frustration about the vicissitudes of Chance than a statement of blame aimed at Celine. Yet she responds as though it were a personal accusation. "I told you why" she reacts defensively. "*I know* why" Jesse answers, again more out of frustration with forces bigger than either of them. He speculates that their lives might have been "so much different," meaning "better," if they had gotten back together nine years ago. Celine, perhaps still thinking of Jesse's marital status and therefore reluctant to dwell on what might have been, even less on what could *be*, throws cold water on that warm thought. She and Jesse, she asserts, might have grown to hate each other, proving compatible only for brief excursions through European cities.

At last these characters are discussing what's been of paramount interest to them ever since they reunited at the bookshop. Why didn't they reconnect in Vienna? What would their lives be like now if they had? The painful realization, coming with age and experience, that life typically offers only a few opportunities to forge a lasting connection. But just because they're finally facing the key issues between them doesn't mean they'll reach the same conclusion.

Looking away from Jesse and out over the flowing river, Celine concludes philosophically that the past is gone and was meant to turn out the way it did. How stoical of her. Fate is an easier pill

to swallow than are missed opportunities. Jesse challenges her, so she tries to reduce their romance to a simple chemical reaction that inevitably yields the same result every time. She's in full retreat now, except that she's still standing by his side. And she's not speaking at a furiously fast pace, the way she did earlier while denying they had sex in Vienna. Jesse argues that the unpredictability of Chance does not add up to *Fate*. A few breaks one way or the other and their reunion might have happened. "You can't think that way" Celine retorts, turning her face away from him. "Can't" implies that even if Jesse's assertion is true, it's too painful to dwell on past opportunities that didn't pan out. So for the sake of one's emotional well-being it's better to think those failures were inevitable.

Jesse won't give up, insisting that undiminished passion such as theirs deserves their best effort to fulfill it. Citing an example of that passion he recounts how even on his wedding day in New York, while heading for the church, he thought he saw Celine walking into a deli. He even remembers the address of that deli, which Celine admits was only two blocks from where she lived at the time. "See?" Jesse concludes, quietly asserting the validity of his original point.

Moving to the other side of Jesse and scrutinizing him closely, not harshly but with more detachment than previously, Celine trumps his philosophical King with a more potent Ace. She asks about his marriage, noting astutely that he hasn't talked much about it since they reunited. Regardless of their almost miraculous close-encounter hours before his wedding (the stuff of romantic comedies and dramas that erect but in the end magically remove all impediments to a happy ending), the fact is that Jesse is *now* a married man. They cannot, at least by Celine's reckoning, simply resume their old romance at the point where it left off, like an incomplete novel. Jesse's life contains chapters belonging to another woman and their child.

Jesse's uninspiring tale of how he met and married his wife is eerily reminiscent of the fiction he told two Viennese men, on a bridge, about himself and Celine having to get married because she got pregnant. Nine years ago he was joking. Now it's real and not so amusing. And in line with other cynical comments he made in Vienna, about couples growing apart after an initial period of passionate love, his marriage too seems to be failing, in spite of his wife's admittedly fine qualities. From the way he tells it, Jesse and his girlfriend were not serious about each other when he got her pregnant. It was the *idea* of being a good man, ready to commit to a woman who was carrying his child, more than genuine love that impelled him to marry her. Respect, trust and admiration formed a supposedly sufficient foundation for a lasting relationship. Playing mental games with himself, he decided it didn't matter much whom he married because no one person can be everything to another person. Perhaps that opinion resulted from his disappointment at being jilted (or so he then believed) by the woman he thought might be *the* one. Maybe he concluded that Celine was not the woman he had hoped she was, and that no woman could live up to his unrealistic expectations.

Jesse's tale of marital woe ends with a whimper, not a bang. He and his wife have had sex fewer than ten times in the last four years. He tells Celine he feels like the monk he imagined himself to be back at the restaurant. She laughs at him, partly because she is relieved to hear his marriage is unsuccessful. But she cannot admit that, any more than Jesse could admit the thought of her photojournalist boyfriend being injured or killed in war was as much wishful thinking as an expression of concern for her emotional well-being. Instead she insists she's laughing at the absurdity of his analogy. Since when do monks have sex ten times in four years? Obviously she forgot her own story about an ex-boyfriend being offered oral sex by a monk during his visit to a

monastery. It suits her *now* to regard monks as invariably chaste. Meanwhile Jesse concludes the sad story of his marriage with a little hyperbole, claiming that if someone were to touch him now, in the way his wife seldom does anymore, he would “dissolve into molecules.” Is that why he occasionally seems preoccupied with sex during his conversations with Celine? Everything that happens between them in this film is heavily influenced by past events.

As he reveals why he committed to marriage with a woman he didn’t love, Jesse joins Celine at the prow of the boat, sitting beside her and turning to face the stern with her. The camera, facing the bow, reveals to us the boat’s approach to its next docking point along the river bank. Is Jesse consciously or unconsciously avoiding the impending end of his time with Celine? Sharing the camera’s perspective, *we* are certainly aware of it. As we approach the point of disembarkation we see, among other things, a painter with his easel standing on the shore. It’s back to the tourist world for Celine, Jesse and us. The boat ride was an unexpectedly intimate and private experience.

Celine finally notices their arrival at the boat landing and motions Jesse to get off the boat with her. Another young couple precedes them. A second couple boards the boat after they get off. Two more relationships we will never know anything about: past, present or future. But undoubtedly they have stories worth telling too.

Walking along the embankment with Jesse, Celine offers condolences over the state of his marriage. She seems sincere, giving him soothing advice. A psychiatrist friend of hers, who is herself admittedly an emotional “mess,” told her it’s impossible for a couple to maintain their initial intensity of passion for one another as the years go by. But even while comforting Jesse, Celine unwittingly circles back to the male/female conflict that has always been a feature of their

volatile relationship. Talking faster, as she tends to do when she's defensive about something, Celine justifies the wife's lack of sexual desire after childbirth as a natural phenomenon. A new mother must devote most of her love and attention to her newborn. She can no longer be a "wildcat" obsessed with sex. "Obsessed?" Is that what Jesse told her he wanted from his wife?

Defending himself from Celine's implied criticism, Jesse insists the alienation between himself and his wife is not fundamentally about sex. Quietly, almost apologetically, Celine concedes his point, undercutting her own. Yet she returns immediately to the clash of perspectives between men and women, pointing out that for so long men have been imprinted with the idea that they must be providers. As a strong and independent woman, she doesn't need a man to feed her, but still needs one to love her and be loved by her. As valid a point as that is, it has nothing to do with Jesse's description of his failing marriage. He said nothing about being robbed of his sense of manhood by a wife who no longer let him "feed" her. As occasionally happened in Vienna, these two characters sometimes talk *at* rather than *with* each other, each on his or her own wavelength, addressing his or her own problems and agendas.

But sometimes being a little self-centered can have, even if by accident, mutually beneficial consequences. After Celine confesses her need to love and be loved by a man, she and Jesse share a moment of awkward, emotionally naked silence. Are they both thinking they'd like to fill those roles for each other? "So, uh . . ." Celine hesitantly continues. Is she about to broach the subject of their possible future together? If so the outside world works against them this time. After tracking them from in front ever since they left the boat, the camera reverses angle to reveal Philippe, Jesse's driver, standing in front of his car, just up ahead. He's out of focus, reflecting our consuming interest in Jesse and Celine and their consuming interest in each other.

He is an unwelcome intruder from outside their intimate circle. Thanks to his presence, "So, uh... ." becomes "I guess this is goodbye" instead of an invitation to greater intimacy.

The lessons Jesse and Celine learned in Vienna serve them well in Paris. When they were about to return to the bookshop and part from one another, he coaxed her to get on a tourist boat with him. This time he cleverly delays their parting by offering her a ride home in the very limousine meant to take him away from her. As he extends that offer Celine simultaneously starts to ask (or so it sounds to me) for his address or phone number. Perhaps she too seeks to extend their renewed acquaintance. Both characters lightly touch each other during this moment of crisis. Jesse overrules Celine's mild reluctance to let him and Philippe be inconvenienced for her sake.

With Notre Dame still visible in the far distance, its architectural splendor now forgotten by them, Celine helpfully conveys their revised travel plans to Philippe, in French. And this time there is no hint of contempt in her manner, as there was on the tourist boat when she played translator during a cell phone conversation between the Phillippe and Jesse.

"This is better than the metro, right?" Jesse states/asks hopefully, seeking Celine's validation. Replying "Definitely," she supplies it. Their ride is off to a fine start. For a short time we hear their dialog while viewing their vehicle from outside as it proceeds towards Celine's apartment. We maintain contact with them through artifice, reminding us that this is a *movie*, where the audience is permitted greater access to characters than we would ordinarily enjoy in real life.

Re-starting their previous conversation about personal matters, Celine claims she isn't as inclined to romanticize her relationships as she once was. It's not a sad development, she insists, just a fact of life. Playing her absent psychiatrist, Jesse speculates that's why she is currently

involved with a man who is frequently absent. A little more defensive now, Celine mocks his unprofessional analysis of her by remarking facetiously that she is obviously unable to deal with the “day-to-day” aspects of a relationship. Then, more seriously and more aggressively, she defends her sporadic relationship as healthy: exciting when her lover is with her, a bit frustrating when he’s gone, but never “suffocating” as she implies a full-time relationship would be, and Jesse’s full-time marriage seems to confirm.

After laying out his own marriage on their conversational dissecting table, Jesse feels entitled to do the same with Celine’s romantic relationship. It’s a dangerous game. He boldly exploits a claim Celine made a few minutes ago, about her need to love and be loved, to challenge her present claim that full time romances are suffocating. Celine, indeed reversing herself, insists that she’s better off alone than being with a man and feeling lonely at the same time. Remember her Vienna confession about being with the “wrong person” on special occasions?

The camera cuts closer to Celine as her mood intensifies and darkens. Talking faster again, reflecting her greater anxiety, she hints at a series of romances that went sour. She’s been “screwed over” too many times to believe any longer in the prospect of a successful long-term relationship. Jesse watches her intently, also in close-up. There is a fire in Celine that is easily provoked, whether intentionally or by accident. For the moment Jesse is careful not to stoke that fire. She soon calms down, even taking back her “screwed over” remark and re-defining her romantic relationships as “blah” rather than hostile. She felt “no real connection” with any of her former lovers, which sounds similar to Jesse’s marriage.

Cautiously, muffling his words by placing his hand over his mouth, Jesse tries to comfort Celine. “Was it really that bad? It’s not, right?” Flaring up again, Celine flashes him a hostile

glare. Whatever bothers her *is* that bad. And now, finally, it all comes out--the central reason for Celine's contradictory reactions to Jesse since they reunited back at the bookshop. Reading "your fucking book" reminded Celine of how hopeful she *used* to be and how cynical she's become. She rolled the romantic dice, staking everything she had on that one night with Jesse in Vienna, and lost. No second chances. Speaking about her former romantic hopes and dreams, "I expressed them to you and you took them with you" comes close to blaming Jesse for destroying her very capacity for love. So even though it was unfortunate happenstance rather than indifference that kept them from reuniting in Vienna six months after they met, both characters harbor lingering resentment of each other. And that resentment does not always yield to reason, despite the undeniable affection that still exists between these two characters.

Tentatively reaching out to touch Celine, then prudently holding back, Jesse quietly challenges her bitter cynicism. "I don't believe that." But there is more to Celine's pain than just her unfulfilled romance with Jesse. She complains that all of her ex-boyfriends are now married, and have expressed gratitude to her for teaching them how to respect women. "I think I'm one of those guys," Jesse tries to interject, accepting blame, only to be met with "I want to *kill* them! Why didn't they ask *me* to marry them? I would have said no, but at least they could have asked!" Is "I would have said no" the truth? Did all of those relationships pale in comparison to her one-night romance with Jesse in Vienna? Or is she just shielding herself from the pain of rejection by pretending she would have rejected all of the men she dated after Jesse?

Anger at the men who have come and gone in her life, including Jesse, is matched by anger at herself for believing in the popular myth of one, true, everlasting love. Perhaps her lovers of the past nine years sensed that she was never willing to commit to them, because of what she

experienced with Jesse in Vienna. If that's what she believes, then of course *he* is to blame for her jaded outlook and romantic failures. A jaded outlook to which their one amazing night together apparently did *not* reduce Jesse, since he got married during that nine-year break. In a roundabout way she's accusing Jesse of infidelity.

Attempting to ameliorate Celine's anger and despair, Jesse tells her she can't live her life by simply avoiding pain. He doesn't mean to sound glib or shallow, but to Celine he does. So she explodes. "I've got to get away from you!" she declares, telling Philippe to stop the car. This is a repeat of their Danube riverbank moment in Vienna, when another disagreement between them almost got out of hand. On that occasion the timely interruption of a street poet trying to extract money from two naïve tourists saved them from disaster. But there is no poet this time. They shout contradictory instructions at Philippe, she in French to stop the vehicle and he in English to keep driving. Their language difference is once again, if only for a moment, a perfect metaphor for their different points of view.

Changing tactics, in effect rewinding the clock to when they met in the bookshop, Jesse simplifies their re-acquaintance to one fundamental fact: he is happy to be with her again. Putting a positive spin on her angry and painful recollections of him, he says he's glad she didn't forget him, which is what he feared when she failed to rendezvous with him in Vienna. Celine, looking resolutely away from Jesse and out the side window while he makes his pitch for a truce, turns on him and reminds him of the unavoidable fact that he is married. And the last thing she needs in her life right now is to get involved with a married man. If *she* couldn't marry anyone else after what she experienced with Jesse in Vienna, how is it that *he* could? That seems to be her implied accusation. But if everything comes down to their one night together, why, Jesse replies

by way of defending himself, did Celine not even remember they had sex? Once again a ghost from a previous conversation intrudes on the present. Shared memories and experiences can either enrich or complicate a relationship. Over time they usually do both.

Celine admits she remembers them having sex. Jesse is surprised to learn this, as he also is to learn that “women pretend things like that.” The gender gap between them is real, sometimes producing misunderstandings with unpleasant consequences. Nevertheless the mood between them has improved. The tempest is over. They can joke with each other again. He refers to her as a manic-depressive activist. She laughs. If he had made the same smartass remark a few moments ago she might have slapped his face, left the limousine and permanently ended their relationship. He commiserates with her miserable love life by reiterating how bad his marriage is and hinting that the best thing for all concerned would be to end it.

While she gazes out the window and he jokes about still enjoying Celine’s company despite her emotional instability, Jesse reaches out to touch her, then nervously withdraws his hand, as he did nine years earlier when he made a tentative move to brush the hair away from her face while they rode a train in Vienna. He guiltily confesses to having dreams about Celine while lying in bed with his wife. Now it’s Celine’s turn to reach out to touch him, then hesitate and pull back too. As happened so often in Vienna, until the very end when their imminent parting forced their hands, so to speak, both characters are reluctant to make themselves emotionally vulnerable, or risk causing unintended offense. After all, it wasn’t that long ago that Celine ordered Jesse *not* to touch her.

Jesse’s romantic dreams about Celine are more than simple wish-fulfillment. They also contain acts of rejection by her: the first harkening back to their parting on a Vienna train station

platform, the second postulating a future in which they're married to each other and Celine is pregnant (shades of his current wife's rejection of him after the birth of their son). Consciously or not, both characters have played the blame game for the past nine years, despite pining for each other all the while. Nothing is simple. On the surface of their present conversation they are working towards a harmonious understanding. Jesse's admission that he probably gave up on the notion of romantic love that December day when Celine failed to meet him in Vienna matches her earlier assertion that their time together in Vienna ruined her chances of forging a love with anyone else. Both claims place implied blame on the other person.

Celine questions why Jesse would tell her *now* about his miserable marriage and the possible reasons for its failure. What difference can such painful disclosures make to their future? She cannot bring herself to ask him to divorce his wife, yet if he doesn't there is no point beating a dead Viennese horse? He apologizes. She then sort of apologizes for her own outburst earlier, noting how easy it is to misread the lives of other people. When she read in an article that Jesse was married, she assumed he was happy, thereby making herself even more miserable and blaming him for it. "Your personal life is more of a mess than mine" she tells him, sorry to hear it yet laughing at the same time. Misery loves company. She no longer feels quite so alone. "I'm glad it's good for something" he replies, noting her amusement with humor of his own. When they're in sync their laughter is infectious. When they're not, it's corrosive.

Celine spots the entryway to her apartment and instructs Philippe, in French, where to go. Jesse stammers while translating her words into English. He's nervous about approaching the end of their second journey together. So he tries to extend their previous discussion, again employing humor. He tells Celine she'll be a good mother someday as long as she takes anti-depressants.

She laughs and does her middle-finger/Russian Roulette bit from way back in Vienna, and again more recently in Paris. He plays along. They share another laugh. But when she introduced that gesture into their relationship at the Kleines Café, it was at the end of an unpleasant disagreement between them. Flipping Jesse the bird was halfway between a harmless joke and a serious signal that she was pissed off with him. This time the same gesture plays as a fond memory for both characters. Another example of how, in a long-term relationship, a shared experience can return as a new and somewhat different experience.

The car stops at a gate preventing vehicle admission to a private lane leading to a private courtyard. Jesse and Celine get out of the car and continue their conversation next to that gate. In effect, Jesse is negotiating for admittance to Celine's private sanctuary, from where we began our second journey with these two characters. Far behind them, through a dark tunnel, is the busy Paris street from which they came, representing the larger, indifferent world they must soon face alone if they fail to heal and extend their private relationship.

Thinking it might be their last moment together, Celine gives Jesse a big hug, as she did when they parted at the train station in Vienna. But she does so this time under the pretence of testing his theory that a touch, after years of physical estrangement from his wife, would "dissolve him into molecules." Of course the hug is, for Celine, much more than a silly experiment. We can see the passionate expression on her face as she clings to him. He cannot. Then the camera shows us *his* face, which Celine cannot see. He obviously feels the same as she does. Remember their first hug following their first kiss in Vienna, up in the Ferris wheel? Both embraces are much more than casual. They verge on desperate.

When Celine starts to let go of him, Jesse holds on for a moment longer. "I like being here" he

tells her. They share a lingering, bittersweet stare while her hands remain on his shoulders. Emotionally it's a slightly awkward moment, relieved by Jesse inquiring about Celine's apartment. Informed that it's at the far end of the lane, he tells Philippe he's going to escort her there. How gallantly old-fashioned of Jesse, except that it's really just an excuse to delay their parting a little longer. Celine makes no protest. Instead she helpfully translates Jesse's intention into French, for Philippe's benefit.

"This is incredible! This is where you live?" Jesse remarks as he glances around at his tranquil, sheltered surroundings, so near yet so different from the busy street they left behind. Nine years ago he exulted in similar terms as he and Celine, following their listening booth adventure at the record shop, began to explore Vienna as a real couple. A subjective camera angle lets us share his first impression of Celine's secluded haven: cobblestones, ivy-covered walls and dappled sunlight--very European and very appealing.

More dispassionately than in the limo, Celine resumes their previous conversation, asking Jesse if his dreams about her were real or just a ploy to "get in my pants." Is *she* joking? Because Jesse certainly is when he replies that *of course* he was angling for sex. It's a comic bit he's used before, with occasional success. She accepts his answer with good humor. They're just filling awkward time and space until facing the moment of truth when they either reclaim or extinguish their old romance.

Celine's cat comes to the rescue, supplying Celine with a new topic of conversation just as the old one lapses. Both characters know they're avoiding the main issue between them. Typically, Celine loves her cat for very specific reasons, including its habit every morning of reacting to various objects in the courtyard as if seeing them for the first time, which is the way Celine

herself would like to see and appreciate the world around her. She picks up and cuddles the animal.

Celine tells Jesse she named her cat "Che." He reacts with an accusatory "Ah ha!" Even in this idyllic setting, and approaching the climactic moment of their long-delayed reunion, the specter of political division slithers back into their dialog. Denying for the umpteenth time that she is a communist, Celine explains that in Argentina "Che" means something very different than what he suspects. Their banter is lighthearted, but Jesse, looking unconvinced, wisely refrains from challenging Celine any further. Both characters have experienced humor that can turn nasty in the blink of an eye.

As we track with Jesse, Celine and Che from in front, they look like a family unit. Celine refers to her beloved cat as "baby." Jesse observes them as he walks alongside. Is he thinking ahead to a time when they could actually *be* a family, perhaps with a real child? Remember the second of his dreams, in which she was pregnant and lying beside him in bed. Or, recollecting his troubled marriage, does he *resent* Celine's preoccupation with her cat, the way his wife was preoccupied with her newborn son? I vote for the former, but cannot rule out the latter.

Entering the broad courtyard, we and Jesse observe Celine's neighbors up ahead, casually dressed and preparing the Parisian equivalent of a barbeque. Celine and one of her neighbors greet each other warmly, in French of course. Jesse does his best to follow suit. Pausing at the entrance to her apartment building, they are met by a woman exiting with a bowl of food. She pauses to greet them both, informally and cordially. "Who is that guy? He's darling. Is he eating with us?" she inquires of Celine, in French. Jesse probably has no idea what she said. Celine tells her Jesse won't be staying because he has to catch a plane. "Too bad" the neighbor lady remarks,

then jokes with the man who greeted Celine and Jesse moments earlier. Why, the man asks, won't the stranger stay and eat with them? "He doesn't like your shorts" the woman replies. They might be husband and wife. Like the argumentative couple on the train to Vienna, they could be a preview of Celine and Jesse after twenty years of marriage: the Austrian pair a grim portrait of mutual irritation and hostility, the French couple a happier variation on the theme of romantic love. Maybe the woman really doesn't like her husband's shorts, and uses Jesse as an excuse to playfully critique them. They seem comfortable with and tolerant of each other. On the other hand, we see and hear them only for a moment. The camera cuts away briefly to show us the neighborhood gathering, minus Celine and Jesse. It's a relaxed and congenial group. They're like a family to Celine, and perhaps could become one for Jesse as well. The courtyard feels like an oasis of security and friendship, insulated from the cold, indifferent world at large.

Jesse makes his move. Knowing that Celine's guitar is in her apartment, he asks her to play one of her songs for him. Her mild protest that he'll miss his flight is brushed aside with little effort. She agrees to one song. They enter the building and ascend a winding staircase to her apartment several floors up. It's such a *European* setting, at least to my expectations: dimly lit, with peeling paint on the walls. In America we might regard it as a run-down tenement. In Paris it might be considered chic. I'm not certain. Jesse claims to "love" it. Is he being honest? Or is he soliciting Celine's favor by flattering her choice of residence in particular and her culture in general? I get the impression he's being honest this time, though both characters have faked enthusiasm on previous occasions.

We accompany our couple via a tracking camera. I'm reminded of Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novak ascending the mission tower staircase at the end of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958),

although the dramatic circumstances are very different this time. Celine, perhaps holding on to Che for emotional support as she and Jesse swim in uncharted waters now, glances at her companion when he is not aware of it. Then they *share* a glance. She sneaks another discrete peek at him, scrutinizing his reactions to their current situation. They exchange another. Jesse looks at Celine and she averts her eyes, putting on a mask of indifference and cooing to her cat. This silent exchange of glimpses is reminiscent of their behavior in the record shop listening booth in Vienna. It's taken them *this* long to get back to where they were nine years ago, when they were on the verge of becoming a romantic couple.

Reaching her apartment, Celine hands Che to Jesse and unlocks the door. He accepts the cat graciously, petting and calling it by name. But is he really a cat person? Remember his unflattering account of spending last night with a cat lying on his head while he tried to get some sleep in the room above the bookshop. And nine years ago he was a *dog* person, which is not to say he can't be a fan of both. But if he doesn't like cats, it's unlikely he would risk antagonizing Celine at this delicate moment by being honest with her. In the long run, if they *have* a long run, the truth will probably come out.

The interior of Celine's apartment is a pleasant jumble of stuff, including piles of books on the floor, art works and many personal photographs on the walls. The furniture is an eclectic assortment, including an oriental-style lantern hanging from the ceiling and a poster depicting an oriental child on the inside of the door. Frankly, it looks like the dwelling of a *single* person.

Upon entering Celine's apartment, Jesse releases the cat. Their parting seems mutually satisfying. Celine offers him tea. He accepts, though whether or not with sincerity is difficult to say. Is he more a beer and coffee guy? Nonetheless he seems genuinely impressed with Celine's

apartment, which he immediately begins to explore. Several scenes ago, just before they boarded the tourist boat, Celine used the English word “bum,” which Jesse misheard as “bomb.”

Turnabout is fair play as the same two characters play out their language differences one more time. Trying to adapt to Celine’s world, he replies “Merci” to her offer of tea. She hears “messy” instead, thinking it’s Jesse’s unflattering description of her apartment. He clarifies his intention. No harm done. Yet a slight tension, which can be either intriguing or corrosive, remains between them. Celine compliments Jesse on his improved command of the French language. He accepts her compliment as genuine, until she makes it humorously obvious it wasn’t. Is she retaliating for his snide reaction to the name of her cat? They both laugh. But when Jesse walks away from her and removes his suit jacket, it’s almost like a boxer removing his robe. The trace of annoyance in his voice acknowledges that she landed a punch. Then he changes their topic of conversation. “All right, all right, what song are you going to play me?” he asks in a somewhat challenging manner. After his little performance in French got shot down, maybe he’s setting up Celine’s musical performance for similar treatment. *She* seems to think so, backing away from her earlier promise to sing for him by pleading embarrassment. Jesse insists she go through with it. She worries he will laugh at her--as she did at him?. His reassurance to the contrary soothes her fear sufficiently for her to proceed.

Accommodating Jesse’s language limitations (it’s amazing how many times the same obstacles, in different guises, crop up between these characters), Celine offers him a choice from among the only three songs she’s written with English lyrics. One is about her cat. One is about a former boyfriend. The third, she reveals with a sheepish grin that betrays more than she intends about its value to her, is a little waltz. Not surprisingly Jesse chooses the waltz. Why would he

want to hear any more about Che or one of her ex-lovers? And though neither is likely aware of it, her offer and his choice of a waltz harkens back to “Vienna Blood,” which they enjoyed while negotiating their future on board a floating restaurant in Vienna.

With his jacket off, wearing a print shirt and dark pants, Jesse looks a little like a cowboy from the American West, dressed up for a Saturday night on the town. By way of cultural counterpoint the ornate statuette of an infant (Cupid?) is visible behind him. Their desire for love is one thing they have in common. Otherwise they are very different. Jesse slouches on Celine’s couch, looking comfortable. He’s starting to feel right at home in her personal space.

Celine is still nervous about performing for Jesse, but a comforting smile and a nod of his head prompts her onward, into the breach. He doesn’t appear to be in a retaliatory mood. The song’s melody, performed on guitar, is simple. But the lyrics evoke Celine’s memories of her night in Vienna with Jesse, which are *not* simple. According to her song, that night was far more important to her (“worth a thousand with anybody [else]”) than it was to him (“just a one-night thing”). And she plainly admits she wants more of them.

Jesse smiles in recognition of the song’s topic. Hesitating for a moment, nervous about making the obvious even more obvious, she addresses the leading man in her musical narrative as “Little Jesse.” His eyebrows rise at the autobiographical honesty of her lyrics. A hand to the back of his head, sliding around to his mouth, betrays his emotional reaction. He would probably like to act on those emotions, but remains respectfully silent and passive. The performance is an out-and-out love song from Celine to Jesse, although it conceals as much as it reveals.

“I have no bitterness, my sweet” is belied by several episodes we witnessed earlier in the film. Celine may not feel any bitterness at this moment, but she *did*, and so did Jesse. And both of

them could again. Nevertheless the song is sweet and heartfelt, expressing feelings Celine tried to hide from herself and Jesse. "I'll never forget this one-night thing" (she avoids calling it a one-night "stand," which has unpleasant connotations), even while she's in the arms of another man. She's baring her deepest emotions to Jesse, in the guise of a song.

The song concludes, triggering a sigh of relief from Celine and enthusiastic applause from Jesse. She's told him exactly what he wanted to hear. Her song is the equivalent of his novel. Neither forgot about the other after their non-reunion in Vienna. Hoping to delay his departure for the airport yet again, Jesse begs for one more song. They're so *close* to a breakthrough, but it doesn't happen yet. Celine adamantly refuses, turning her back on him and walking away. Fetching his drink, she tells him firmly, "You're going to have your tea and then . . ." She doesn't complete the sentence with "you're going to leave." Maybe it's too painful to say out loud. "That was our deal" she insists. Does she not remember the disastrous "deal" they made at the train station where they parted in Vienna, planning a reunion in six months but adamantly avoiding an exchange of contact information that might have prevented its failure?

Resenting Celine's sudden coldness, Jesse retaliates. Standing up from the couch (getting ready to leave?) he asks her if she merely *plugged* his name into her song, and does the same with every guy she brings to her apartment. Jump back to their difference of opinion about the sincerity of the Viennese poet who may or may not have composed an original poem for them around a word they chose. Self-consciously or not, Jesse uses the same, pinched finger gesture he employed nine years ago. The past returns, with its original animosity. Celine, possibly remembering Jesse's cynicism on that occasion, plays along with it. Yes, of course she merely inserted "Little Jesse" into her song as a matter of convenience. *All* prior events, gestures and

words become grist for present and future encounters, friendly or not, in a long-term relationship. The saving grace this time is that Celine laughs flirtatiously while admitting, or *pretending* to admit, her crime. Jesse responds with a fond smile. They are not on the verge of another serious argument. They merely flirted with it, and with each other, by dredging up a past one. Couples are allowed to do that, though it can be a dangerous game.

In no hurry to leave, Jesse resumes his exploration of Celine's apartment. He finds family photos of Celine as a child and with her beloved grandmother. "Want some honey?" Celine calls out from the kitchen. It's so close to "Want some, *honey*?" that it's almost a preview of their possible future as a couple. But it's just a reference to the tea she's preparing for him. They're comfortable with each other again. Celine is no longer eager to send him on his way. And he's getting to know her a little better through her possessions. She sneaks fond glances at him while he does so.

Since Celine won't perform another song for him, Jesse plays one for *her*, chosen from her CD collection and played on her stereo. It's a jazz rendition of "Just in Time." How appropriate! The title of the song is perfectly suited to the situation in which Celine and Jesse find themselves: he muddling through an unhappy marriage, she stumbling through a string of unfulfilling romantic relationships, both secretly desperate to find each other again before sinking into hopeless cynicism. Another piece of good fortune is that the song's performer, Nina Simone, connects the two of them on cultural and political levels. An American by birth, Simone became a political activist and feminist who eventually settled in France. More importantly, Jesse and Celine are both familiar with Simone's work. Otherwise Celine wouldn't have the CD in her collection and Jesse wouldn't have chosen to play it. Unlike the belly dancer in Vienna, whose performance

Celine enjoyed and understood but Jesse did neither, Simone encourages harmony between them. Music can have such power.

Handing Jesse his cup of tea, Celine pours one for herself and saunters back towards the couch, which he has re-occupied. And that's not all. She sings along with parts of the recording, mixing in descriptions of Simone's sultry live performances with her own imitations thereof.

Figuratively speaking, she *becomes* Nina Simone in order to perform again for Jesse, which she refused to do only moments ago. He has coaxed her into a second song after all, and she uses that performance to flirt with him, under the pretence of describing something *else*: Nina Simone's flirtation with her nightclub audience. Jesse thoroughly enjoys the performance. Simone's "cute ass" becomes Celine's "cute ass," clearly pointed in Jesse's direction.

Celine's description of Simone's performance style curiously matches the complex course of Jesse and Celine's relationship. One song interrupts another and digression piles on digression. It's a convoluted yet fascinating entanglement of various ingredients. "You're cute" coos Celine, speaking *as* Simone but *for* herself, to Jesse. He is simultaneously an anonymous member of Simone's entranced audience at one of her live performances *and* Jesse Wallace, former and about to be future lover of Celine ... what is *her* last name? She dances for him, pursing her lips and gently swaying her body. Talking of present, pressing matters yet imitating Nina Simone's stage voice, she tells Jesse, "Baby, you are gonna miss that plane." The camera inches closer to Jesse as he replies, with a big grin, "I know." He speaks the line matter-of-factly, as though the outcome were inevitable. But at the same time he rubs his wedding ring with the thumb of the same hand, perhaps betraying a twinge of guilt at giving up on his marriage and cheating on his wife. Then he stops rubbing, his hand drops and the ring disappears from our line of sight. He

laughs joyfully at Celine's performance.

From Jesse's point of view we watch Celine continue to dance as the screen fades out. *Their* dance, as it were, goes on and on, with no final embrace or kiss to suggest they lived Happily Ever After. Instead, "Just in Time" supplies that missing component. "No more doubt. No more fear." The weary time-travelers have forged a wonderfully romantic if unconventional resolution to their long-delayed passion for each other. Stay tuned for further developments.

"Just in Time" continues as the screen leisurely fades to black and the closing credits roll by. But midway through those credits the Nina Simone song is displaced by one performed and presumably written by Celine (Julie Delpy). It's one of her *French* songs, "Je t'aime tant," and it's fantastic. Unlike "Just in Time" it's a mixed portrait of love as alternately exhilarating and tormenting, never consistently one or the other. The lyrics describe an obsessive lover who is equally capable of displaying passionate devotion and inflicting emotional harm. Is this Celine musically contemplating herself? And if so, what would the effect have been if she had performed *this* song for Jesse, and he had understood her French lyrics? "Je t'aime tant" is a little antidote, somewhat disguised for those of us who don't understand French (my linguistically less challenged sister translated the lyrics for me), to the happy ending we've just witnessed. Or maybe it expresses the despair and cynicism Celine was feeling *before* she and Jesse re-discovered each other and worked out some of their differences. As always, the ending of each film in Richard Linklater's romantic trilogy leaves me wanting more.

"Je t'aime tant" is a perfect segue from the implied happy ending of *Before Sunset* to our re-entry, nine years later with *Before Midnight*, into the complicated romance of Celine and Jesse, even though Julie Delpy could not have known, when she wrote and performed the song, how

things would transpire in the second sequel to *Before Sunrise*. The many and varied obstacles the two characters have had to overcome in order to forge, renew and sustain their love encourages us to root for them to succeed. Their tango is a marathon, not a sprint.

Before Midnight: One Last Dance?

The third tango begins with a shot of two pairs of feet walking through the Kalamata Airport terminal in Greece. Similar shots in *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* always involved Jesse and Celine. Former lovers and family members were occasionally topics of their conversations, but the only characters with whom Celine and Jesse interacted directly for any length of time were each other. Their world in Vienna and Paris was an enchanted bubble of isolation, providing them with an opportunity for nearly unfettered communication that often worked in their favor, but sometimes did not. In a sense they were on vacation from the rest of the world.

Late in *Before Sunrise* a close-up of two pairs of feet show Celine and Jesse walking along a train terminal platform in Vienna. At the start of *Before Midnight* the camera tilts up from travelling shoes to reveal Jesse and his son, Hank, also on the verge of a painful separation. Hank is returning home to his mother in Chicago after spending the summer with his father in Greece. From the get-go *Before Midnight* introduces a new character who, although never seen again after we leave the airport, plays an important role in everything that happens later. No more splendid isolation for Celine and Jesse in which to act out their intricate romance. Their tango for

two has become a dance for three, with more participants waiting in the wings.

Long divorced from Hank's mother and trying to compensate for being an absent father, Jesse is protective of his son and full of well-intentioned yet nagging advice, asking the boy if he remembered to pack everything (he didn't, as we and Jesse discover later) and suggesting he read a book rather than play video games during his flight. What else would a professional writer tell his child? Jesse finds himself on the other side of a generation gap he and Celine discussed at length in *Before Sunrise*, when they complained about parents trying to control their lives. Hank's casual reply that he might do *some* reading on the plane is a vague, empty promise by a son who has no intention of keeping it. Jesse encourages Hank to keep in touch through e-mail or skypeing. Divorced dad wants to maintain the long-distance channels of communication with his son, adapting to the boy's technology-driven world while keeping one foot in his own world of books.

There are no overt signs of tension between these characters. They speak in a normal tone of voice. Hank is relaxed and agreeable, if a little emotionally detached. Perhaps he has grown accustomed to goodbyes with his estranged parents. He is not bitter, that we can tell from our brief acquaintance with him. But he seems more independent than most kids his age about to fly solo from one continent to another. In that regard he resembles his father, another child of divorced parents, in *Before Sunrise*.

Jesse places a hand on Hank's shoulders—a gesture of affection that might be too obvious and therefore awkward for both father and son. So he quickly transforms it into a more tough-minded, finger-pointing interrogation about whether or not the boy remembered to pack his drawings for the science project on which he was working while vacationing in Greece.

Tempering Jesse's prudent reminders and instructions are generous doses of fatherly praise for his son's accomplishments: an indirect way for Jesse to say he loves the boy without subjecting either to a sappy, direct declaration. Hank accepts his dad's compliments graciously, but with little indication that he craves or needs them. "Thanks" he replies offhandedly as he selects candy from a food counter. Jesse returns to the role of protective parent, inquiring if Hank's computer is fully charged. Of course it is. By now Hank strikes us as a very grown-up young man fairly adept at fending for himself. Jesse touches the boy's backpack, seeking closer contact with Hank through an emotionally neutral object that won't embarrass him.

A profile shot of Hank perusing the candy counter pictures Jesse in the near background. He says nothing. But his facial expression, which Hank cannot see, shows us what Jesse cannot bring himself to say: affection mixed with guilt, plus uncertainty as to how he can express the former and assuage the latter. Typically, he takes the indirect approach.

"What do you think's the first thing you're gonna do when you get home?" Jesse asks Hank. *Before Midnight*, like its two predecessors, is full of déjà vu moments, for the audience if not always for the characters. Jesse and Celine asked the same question of each other shortly before parting company in *Before Sunrise*. It was a way of maintaining contact with each other's day-to-day lives while apart. Both characters generously supplied details of their expected activities. Hank, keeping his eyes on the food counter, instead offers his father a terse, unsatisfactory "I don't know." He's not hostile, but neither is he emotionally engaged.

Jesse indirectly scolds the boy for his inadequate response by making a snide remark about "cherishing" these special moments of communication between them. Hank, still not fully engaged in their dialog, doesn't comprehend his father's meaning, though he finally deigns to

Glance in his father's direction. If he resents Jesse's frequent absence in his life, he successfully represses it. Yet his minimal responses have the probably unintended effect of punishing his father.

Frustrated by his inability to penetrate Hank's self-protective shield, Jesse mildly retaliates by dispensing more fatherly advice. Keep up with your piano lessons because "you're really good" and because music is something you can "use" later in life. Jump back to Jesse admiring Celine's songwriting, guitar playing and singing talents at the end of *Before Sunset*. Then leap forward to her complaint later in *Before Midnight* that she no longer has time to pursue her music and that Jesse never encourages her to do so. Think back even further, to *Before Sunrise*, when Celine complained to Jesse about her parents' attempts to transform her "fanciful ambitions" of youth into "practical [i.e. "useful"], money-making ventures." Now a father concerned about his son's future, Jesse treats Hank the way Celine's parents treated her. Balancing the sour with the sweet, Jesse makes amends for his paternal nagging by telling Hank to pick out a box of his favorite candy.

Jesse's t-shirt features an insignia for Neptune Records, featuring a picture of a whale. Is it an environmentally conscientious record company, or a non-profit commercial effort to save whales? It may be a token of Celine's profession as an environmental advocate. If so, it's a reminder of Celine's invisible presence in this opening scene. Just as Hank's presence will be keenly felt, long after he flies home to Chicago, in later scenes involving Jesse and Celine. Of course we don't even know yet if Celine and Jesse are still a couple, or what the state of their relationship is even if they are.

While Jesse's conversation with Hank remains prominent on the soundtrack, the camera cuts to

a more distant view of them. They occupy the background as we watch two parents lead their young children by the hand through the terminal. Unnoticed by Jesse, they remind us of the kind of parental relationship he did *not* have with Hank while the boy was growing up. And as we watch these contrasting family realities pass by one another, Jesse promises he will *try* to get to Chicago in October to attend Hank's upcoming piano recital and one of his soccer games.

But Hank tosses two monkey wrenches into Jesse's effort to maintain closer contact with him. First, he doesn't enjoy playing soccer and wants to quit the team. Disappointed, Jesse encourages him to stick with it. Why? Does he want Hank to be just like *him*? Jesse once told Celine he was an excellent swimmer, but that might have been flirtatious bull. Other than that, we have no evidence that Jesse was an athlete in school. Does he merely want to impart to his son the value of sticking with something even when it's not going well? Maybe he wants Hank to maintain a balance between academic and athletic pursuits. Whatever Jesse's reasoning, Hank is now at an age when kids start to decide for themselves what they will and won't pursue in life. No compromise is reached between father and son on this occasion. From the boy's silence in the face of his father's persistent advice we can guess that in Jesse's absence Hank will quit the soccer team. And his use of the term "miniscule," to describe his chances of making the team, demonstrates where his talents *do* lie. Maneuvering for a moral advantage, he reminds Jesse that by spending his vacation in Greece, at his father's request, he sacrificed any practice time he might have spent on the soccer field over the summer.

Still harping on soccer, Jesse tells Hank to blame his parents for preventing him from attending summer practice. It's an indirect way for Jesse to blame himself for the overall failure he believes himself to be as a parent. But think back to the lounge car scene in *Before Sunrise*, when

he complained to Celine about his parents trying to map out his future for him as a kid, and how he enjoyed defying them by doing the opposite. Why should it surprise him that Hank is following in his defiant footsteps?

“I don’t care that much” about soccer, replies Hank, making an assertion that covers a much broader range of subjects. He exhibits very little emotion about leaving his father again for many months, and will probably exhibit little more when his mother picks him up in Chicago. That doesn’t necessarily mean he *feels* nothing. He’s just learned to keep it all inside and avoid disappointment. Hank’s story line, more or less, will be explored in much greater detail by Linklater in his 2014 movie *Boyhood*.

On a happier note, upon reaching the departure gate father and son finally agree on something. This is an ‘awesome’ airport. Jesse asks the boy if he is excited about seeing his mother. “Yeah” Hank replies with less enthusiasm, tacking on “and all my friends” to perhaps disguise trouble at home. There are hints in this and later scenes that Hank’s relationship with his mother is strained. It’s possible that he prefers spending time with Jesse and Celine, especially Celine. But I’m getting ahead of myself again, because the film hasn’t yet informed us what role Celine currently plays in either Jesse or Hank’s life.

Feeling the pressure of impending loss, Jesse again embraces the role of protective parent, checking to see if Hank brought his passport and boarding pass, and remembers how to make the tricky connection between flights. Arrangements have already been made by Jesse to have a responsible adult from the airline supervise that transfer. Hank apparently doesn’t resent this benevolent intrusion, but doesn’t seem to need it much either. “It’s not a problem” he assures Jesse, who holds up his hands in a gesture of conciliation, as if promising to stop being a control

freak.

Predictably it is Jesse rather than Hank who initiates a final hug before departure. The boy accepts and returns it, but seems to need it less than does his father. Much more important to the boy at this juncture is the matter of Jesse's promise to come to Chicago in October to attend his piano recital. Hank asks his father *not* attend because his mother, Jesse's ex-wife, "hates you so much." The unemotional teenager opens up on the highly emotional topic of *hate*. And since Hank doesn't object to Jesse visiting him in Chicago at any other time, it seems pretty clear that the recital is a big deal to him. The ongoing conflict between his parents, despite his cool and calm façade, upsets him enough to endanger that performance. And the fact that Hank waited until the last possible moment to express his concern suggests that he had to overcome much reluctance to do so. Emotionally it's equivalent to Jesse and Celine, at the end of *Before Sunrise*, confessing to each other at the last possible moment their wish to see each other again.

Pulling Hank out of line at the departure gate, Jesse places a hand on the boy's shoulder and tries to reassure him they'll "figure something out," which is vague on details but sounds soothing. He also tries to joke his way out of an awkward situation by inquiring why his ex-wife hates him so much? Hank informs that she hates "Daniel" more than she does Jesse. Is "Daniel" her current lover? Another divorced husband? Hank taps Jesse on the shoulder, comforting him--a reversal of the roles Jesse wanted to play with his son.

Jesse assures the boy of his enduring love. Hank replies, "This has been the best summer of my life." Not exactly "I love you too," but it's close enough for Jesse. They hug, which is a form of "I love you" more easily reciprocated by the boy. A less emotional handshake follows, followed by a gentle kick in the ass by Jesse to send Hank on his way. They're back on safe, masculine

ground. All seems well until we see Jesse's face in close up as he watches Hank pass through the gate, accompanied by a few wistful notes of solo piano music on the soundtrack. The very instrument Jesse will probably *not* hear his son play in October, because his presence would make the recital uncomfortable for Hank. Love, regret, the pain of impending separation—they're all evident in the music and on Jesse's face. The sight of Hank looking very self-assured and independent, yet at the same time small and vulnerable as he threads his way through airport security and disappears from view without so much as a backward glance, is crushing for Jesse. He is haunted by the opposing thoughts that his son has grown up largely without him but that he should accompany and protect the boy on his long trip back to Chicago, and through the rest of his adolescence. Jesse wasn't there to play the role he still feels he should though may no longer be needed to play.

Just as we and the camera tracked with a silent, somber Jesse after he left Celine at the train terminal near the end of *Before Sunrise*, we now track with him as he exits the airport, his thoughts consumed by his absent son. The detachment of other airport patrons in this scene, as of the train terminal patrons in the first movie, sharply contrasts Jesse's intense emotional involvement in Hank's life, and ours with *him*. It's not a parade of human cruelty on display here. Jesse is as detached from the lives of strangers as they are from his. Linklater continues to use the transitory presence of anonymous characters to illustrate the "space between" individuals, as Celine once described it. For Jesse, nothing and no one else matters at this moment except his son. Most of the external world is suitably out of focus as we exit the airport with him.

The background music that accompanies Jesse evokes a feeling of nostalgia for lost childhood.

Hank's childhood is rapidly disappearing for the father who wasn't there for most of it. And that will not be the only loss we mourn during the course of *Before Midnight*. As we catch up with the current state of affairs between Jesse and Celine, the romantic lyricism of Vienna too will seem like a bygone paradise only fitfully remembered by the main characters. They will have to struggle to recover it.

Jesse walks towards his rental car on the street outside the terminal. For the first time in the movie we see Celine, leaning against the passenger door, talking on her cell phone, in French. We hear her voice from a distance, in counterpoint to the music subjectively plugged into Jesse's lingering thoughts about Hank. Celine, we subsequently learn, is at this moment absorbed in matters of great importance to *her*, including disappointment over her latest environmental effort and the possibility of changing jobs. She and Jesse, though by no means hostile to one another at this juncture, are on very different emotional wavelengths. Both are dissatisfied with some aspect of their lives, but not the same aspect. Obviously still a couple, they remain individuals whose perceptions never completely overlap.

Spotting Jesse heading for the driver's side door, Celine enters on the opposite side while continuing to talk on the phone. There is no visible or verbal token of acknowledgement between them, which is not in itself an indication of estrangement. They've been a couple for so long they function together automatically on some levels. But what a difference between *this* reunion, admittedly occurring only a short while after they last saw each other, and their initial encounters in the two earlier movies. Meanwhile an older couple strolls past them, bags in hand, headed for the terminal. Are they a preview of Celine and Jesse in twenty years? Only if the younger couple stays together that long.

Like Jesse, Celine has aged noticeably in the past nine years, and certainly since we first saw her in 1994. There is the normal wear and tear of life. No heavy make-up or fake padding is necessary to create the illusion of aging because the actors have grown older at the same pace as their characters. The audience can measure its own advancing years by observing Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy. We can also re-watch *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset* and, at some point in the future, *Before Midnight* to re-capture our youth for a short time.

Before entering the car, Jesse glances through the back seat window at his and Celine's twin daughters. His pensive facial expression counterpoints the serene, carefree expressions of his sleeping girls, their bodies responsibly secured in safety belts. With their heads inclined towards each other, they present an idyllic portrait of blissful childhood. The music, which had been rooted in Jesse's melancholy over Hank, now becomes theirs. It and the world suddenly seem brighter.

A younger couple walks by as the car departs from the airport. Together with the elderly couple that passed by on the other side of the vehicle, they neatly bracket our middle-aged couple in terms of age and experience. Perhaps it's Linklater's way of reminding us that love and life never stand still.

The music continues as we gaze out at the beautiful Greek land and seascape through the windshield of the rental car. The ocean reflects both dazzling sunlight and blue sky: idyllic scenery to match the idyllic twins occupying the back seat. Yet in the front seat Jesse's preoccupation with Hank (echoed by the music) clashes slightly with Celine's less sentimental voice as she continues talking on the phone. A passing road sign warns of sharp curves ahead, which will prove true in more ways than one.

A reverse camera angle gives us our first image of the entire family. Everyone wears seat belts. They look like any conventional, happy family of nearly ten years. Perhaps a little complacent (we all take things for granted from time to time), but close-knit. Celine ends her phone conversation and tells Jesse the bad news about the failure of her latest environmental effort.

They sound like a couple very much in sync, at first. Jesse understands the work in which Celine is involved and commiserates with her disappointment. But when she announces that she's thinking of quitting her job and going to work for the government, a small difference of opinion arises. Jesse opposes such a career change, pointing out that she'd be working for the same man for whom she hated working previously. Celine insists the "asshole" at least gets things done, and that she's willing to become one herself in order to overcome the frustration of feeling powerless. In other words she's willing to lower her standards at this point in her life. It's a long time since Vienna, and yet Celine and Jesse still talk to each other with passion and intelligence, though maybe a tad less patience. Jesse's remark about Celine complaining constantly about her former and possibly future boss carries a hint of his own irritation at having to *listen* to it. Is he more interested in saving Celine from being "miserable" again or in saving himself from having her misery inflicted on *him*?

Unable to dissuade Celine, Jesse concedes. But then he stubbornly renews the debate. "Are you sure?" He just can't leave it alone. And so it's Celine's turn to become irritated. She resents Jesse's lack of support, partly because she *does* have doubts about the new job opportunity, and he's exacerbating them. She's also, conscientiously, worried how quitting her current job will affect her co-workers. She's emotionally torn, as she proves to be about many things in her life during the course of the movie, including her quasi-marriage to Jesse, her quasi-maternal

relationship with Hank, her quasi-fame as the model for the female character in Jesse's first and second novels, their Greek vacation, the hotel room another couple arranges for them to stay in and her competence as a mother.

In *Before Sunrise* Jesse expressed concern that if he and Celine engaged in a long-term relationship she would grow tired of his mannerisms. Celine assured him the opposite would be true. At this moment Jesse seems to be winning that ancient debate. The weight of Celine's past complaints about her former boss shapes Jesse's reaction to the prospect of her returning to work for the same man. And judging from her reaction to Jesse's reaction, she's a little exasperated by his habitual failure to back up her decisions. Some familiar traits can be endearing and comforting, but obviously not all of them.

Celine asks Jesse point blank whether or not she should reapply for her old government job. He refuses to give her the direct answer she wants. Is he wary of her reaction? Has experience made him gun-shy? Instead of a straightforward "Yes" or "No," he insists he just doesn't want her to base such an important decision on her disappointment over a single setback in her current job. Unfortunately his ambiguous answer annoys her further. Whether his advice is well-meaning or selfishly motivated, it doesn't have the effect he intended.

Celine's determination to switch jobs stiffens. Jesse testily tells her to go ahead and do it. They've ostensibly reached a consensus. But the tone of their agreement suggests otherwise. They've merely side-stepped an uncomfortable impasse. After a moment of silence the slight tension between them dissipates. They can finally agree wholeheartedly on something--that "the world is fucked." Need proof? They finally get to take a family vacation and the girls get sick for two weeks. And Jesse has a great son who unfortunately lives far away. Celine glances at him

sympathetically. As both characters have done in the past, she tries to joke him out of his somber mood. “Or the love of your life can’t clean up after himself or learn how to shave” she remarks with a smile. Is it an expression of affection playfully disguised as a criticism? Or a criticism unwittingly disguised as an expression of affection? It sounds like the former, until we look back on this scene in the context of the bitter argument that occurs near the end of the movie, when neither Jesse nor Hank nor their bathroom habits are endearing to the woman who’s had to clean up after them.

Jesse accepts Celine’s invitation to comic banter, referring to himself as “Captain Clean-Up.” Celine tweaks his ear and pinches his scruffy, unshaven face. He mock retaliates with a playful pinch of his own. She mildly protests the pain that pinch causes. No serious harm done. But it’s a curious repeat of an incident in Vienna, as they approached a Seurat poster on a lamppost along a deserted street. Exchanging flirtatious kicks to each other’s legs, Jesse went a little too far on that occasion too, drawing a similar protest from Celine. Neither incident has serious consequences. Yet in a modest way they both illustrate how even a feigned conflict can potentially escalate into something more serious.

The twins unwittingly come to their parents’ rescue by diverting Celine from the matter of Jesse’s sloppy grooming habits. They are “so cute” she must take a picture of them. Yes, sleeping children are often at their cutest. They’re more like an idealized portrait of childhood than the real thing. Jesse asks Celine to confiscate Ella’s half-eaten apple for him to eat, which triggers more humorous, relationship-affirming joking between them. Celine accuses him of stealing food from his own child. He casually admits it. She takes a photo of the guilty party eating the stolen apple as proof for their daughter that not everything is her *mother’s* fault. There

is no obvious subtext here. No bitter edge to Celine's voice. The dialog between her and Jesse is funny and fun, the way it should be between lovers. But with hindsight it is possible to read hints of trouble in this lighthearted exchange. Does Celine really feel she too often has to play the disciplinarian with their children ("not everything is her *mother's* fault"), and that Jesse has been too absent in their lives, as he's already convinced he has been in Hank's? On the other side of this subtle blame game is a trace of here-we-go-again in Jesse's smirk as Celine jokes hypothetically about Ella getting an eating disorder because her dad stole her apple. Jesse offers an equally lighthearted and specious self-defense about teaching Ella the value of family sharing. Only in the wake of future arguments does their comic dialog in this scene take on a darker meaning.

Ella and Nina are the names of Jesse and Celine's children, possibly in honor of Nina Simone and Ella Fitzgerald, two famous jazz singers admired by both parents. Or so we heard them express about Simone in *Before Sunset*. The names are a token of agreement between Jesse and Celine. Likewise they both agree that their children will remember this Greek vacation differently than will their parents. Illustrating that point, Jesse contrasts his own recollections of his childhood with his mother's memories of the same, implying that his are more accurate than hers. But as quickly as he and Celine agree on something, a hint of conflict reappears. Jesse politely but firmly asks Celine to stop filming him with her cell phone camera. She respectfully complies, but a moment later voices admiration for Jesse's mother, in effect taking her side. "You're always so hard on her." Jesse retorts that Celine didn't know his mother during the "fucked up" years. Is this a gender issue, with Celine defending another woman against criticism from an ungrateful man/child? Does Jesse resent Celine's previous crack about Ella potentially

developing an eating disorder as her thinly veiled criticism of the way men treat women in general? Trivial comments in the present sometimes carry the weight of longstanding disagreements.

Harmony returns. Celine picks up on Jesse's remark about his mother's "fucked up" behavior during his childhood by recounting a similar experience of her own. Her father recently confessed to her that he and Celine's mother euthanized many of the kittens her beloved pet cat, Cleopatra, presented to the family. She commiserates with Jesse about their "fucked up" childhoods. And in this agreement they echo sentiments both expressed on more than one occasion in Vienna. For a moment they are a close-knit couple again, their intimacy expressed through what superficially seems to be trivial conversation. But their relationship has always been mercurial.

Passing ancient Greek ruins set against another picturesque landscape, Celine reminds Jesse of his promise to the girls that they could explore those ruins before leaving the country. But he doesn't want to stop. Is he in a hurry to get somewhere, or merely annoyed at the delay? Does he selfishly place his own interests ahead of his children's? Will he just as easily forget his promise to visit Hank in the fall? And if so, is such benign neglect a habit with him? He compromises by telling Celine they'll stop at the ruins later, on their way to the airport. She calls his bluff. "You know we won't." He admits it, but in a flippant rather than apologetic manner. Celine yields. It's not a matter worth arguing about. Yet she shushes Jesse when he jokes a little too loudly, because it might wake up the girls and alert them to their parents' unfulfilled promise. The apple, the ruins and the shushing all mark Celine as the more conscientious parent.

Proving the point, Celine rescinds her concession to Jesse and pronounces them both "shitty

parents,” urging him to return to the ruins. His rationale for not doing so is as glib as his previous excuse. He humorously claims to be teaching their daughters a valuable life lesson: “You snooze, you lose in this world.” It’s a dubious argument, like the monkey story he told Celine in Vienna. Adopting Jesse’s facetious manner, Celine challenges his rationale by exaggerating the potential damage it could do to the girls. They might become drug addicts requiring rehabilitation because Jesse made them terrified of sleeping away their opportunities. Jesse laughs derisively at her inflated scenario, as he did at her comment about his theft of their daughter’s apple potentially leading to her eating disorder. But underneath this jovial teasing between lovers, does Jesse really believe Celine is an overprotective mother, and Celine in turn that Jesse is a negligent father?

Jesse eventually concedes he is indeed a “shitty parent.” Celine’s verbal jab hit its intended target, but for reasons unrelated to the twins, apples or Greek ruins. Jesse tells Celine, with no more glibness in his voice, how difficult it was for him to say goodbye to Hank at the airport. Celine responds sympathetically, reassuring Jesse that Hank meant it when he said this was the best summer of his life. But with her next breath she reduces Jesse, Hank and all men to a lowest common denominator, concerned only with their appearance and how women perceive them. Jesse protests, but Celine sticks to her guns, at least with regard to *him*. Hank is all but forgotten as she targets Jesse’s preoccupation with women and sex. And not just sex with *her*, but on at least a fantasy level with other women as well. “I’m not complaining” she insists, unconvincingly. She *is* complaining.

On their first night together, in Vienna, Celine noticed Jesse ogling another woman as they approached the entrance to a nightclub. Was it an ogle or merely a passing glance? In either case

it was significant enough for Celine to mention it, though the incident was quickly forgotten in favor of other matters. Later that same evening Celine returned the gaze of two men who were obviously ogling *her*, though Jesse didn't notice them and therefore did not comment on it. In *Before Sunset* Celine criticized French men for not being sufficiently "horny" to suit her taste, in contrast to American males. Over the years her views have not been consistent on this topic. On the other hand, Jesse's sexual fidelity to Celine comes into serious question later in *Before Midnight*. So perhaps she has good reason to be ambivalent about his active libido.

This is a potentially explosive new topic for our couple. Yet they manage to keep the lid on by making a game of it. Jesse transforms Celine's charge that he "ogles" women into the more romantic "I make love to them with my eyes," delivering that line with a deep voice and foreign, European accent. Have they returned to the culture war that was evident in their very first conversation in *Before Sunrise*? Jesse is tossing a little Continental machismo back in Celine's face. She, in turn, pokes fun at his pathetic attempt at a European accent. Is it Spanish or Greek, she asks. He trumps her insult by embracing and mocking it, declaring his fictional European lover to be "very hairy." Man as a gender reduced to Neanderthal status. He's not talking so much about body hair as about a primitive, simplistic, thoroughly self-centered attitude: presumably the attitude he suspects Celine believes all men possess. He's mocking her mockery of him. Celine laughs. Jesse laughs. Not for the first time they joke their way out of a looming fight. But they will not be able to fend off confrontation forever. And they will not always have their sleeping children nearby to temper their behavior.

After previously diverting their discussion about Hank in order to take a verbal shot at Jesse's excessive interest in sex and other women, Celine brings the boy back into their conversation.

She informs Jesse that Hank kissed a girl during his Greek vacation. *That* was the reason this was his “best summer ever,” not because of the time he spent with his father, as Jesse assumed. Maybe she just wants to reassure Jesse that his son had a great time in Greece, or maybe she wants to hurt him a little. It must be a deflating for not-quite-so-dear old dad. On top of that is Jesse’s realization that Hank asked Celine, not his father, for advice about kissing a girl. Celine seems to have found the experience endearing. She is genuinely fond of the boy, and has no clue yet that their relationship could be viewed by Jesse as a threat.

Like quicksilver, disappointment turns to pride, then to wildly romantic fiction as Jesse speculates about Hank and the Greek girl spending the rest of their lives together. He touches Celine affectionately, clearly drawing a parallel to *their* story. Unfortunately Celine does not share his nostalgia at this moment. Instead she shoots it down, humorously challenging his manliness by comparing his sentimentality to that of a twelve year old girl. She also questions his claim that she was his *first* love. So by Celine’s reckoning Jesse is either a hopelessly maudlin, pre-adolescent girl or a perpetually horny male with no true romantic feelings. Not exactly a winning choice.

Jesse struggles to get in a word edgewise to defend himself. He insists Celine was indeed his first love, though admittedly not his first sexual experience. She doesn’t buy it. Apparently neither remembers the discussion they had about love versus sex during their Q and A session in Vienna. On that occasion Jesse admitted *telling* a woman, before he met Celine, that he loved her, but admitted he didn’t really mean it in the way he eventually did, with Celine.

In response to a question from Jesse, Celine states frankly that he was not *her* first love. He seems surprised and hurt, until she jokes him out of it, prompting him to laugh it off and claim,

perhaps falsely, that all his romantic blather was just a ploy to get her into bed later this evening. "I got a Trojan in my billfold and a rocket in my pocket" he quips. Or maybe he really is disappointed by Celine's insistence that he wasn't her first love, and is covering up in order to seem less vulnerable. If both characters are speaking the truth, rather than hiding behind emotional shields, it invalidates what they said and seemed to genuinely feel about each other in Vienna and again in Paris.

"I'm stuck with an American teenager" Celine laments, but with a trace of a smile. But if that smile signals approval, her next words do not. She inquires if they have to "do all that stuff later." Jesse assumes she's referring to dinner with their Greek hosts and their fellow vacation guests. He insists they're obligated, using Nina and Ella to pad his argument. But Celine was referring to their scheduled evening alone, without the kids, at a hotel. Many middle-aged couples would relish the opportunity to ditch their children and spend quality time alone with each other. That Celine finds the idea unappealing suggests more underlying tension between the couple than we've yet observed.

Before the matter is pursued further, they are perhaps fortunately interrupted. Celine gets a phone call from Hank, whose plane is about to depart for London. She refers to the boy as "sweetie" and tells him to phone again when he lands. The call is necessarily brief because he and other passengers were instructed to switch off their cell phones. Jesse wanted to speak with his son and is frustrated to be shut out. Noticing that frustration, Celine asks him about it, which accidentally triggers the next crisis between them. Sensing Hank slipping away from him, and previously informed that the boy chose to confide in Celine rather than his father about his first kiss, Jesse worries out loud about not being with his son during the critical years ahead. Celine

commiserates both verbally and by laying a comforting hand on Jesse's shoulders, in contrast to her accusatory finger-poking earlier. Surprisingly, they're moving closer together emotionally. Celine is even open to Hank coming to live with them, which is a very generous offer to make. She accepts the difficult role of step-mother.

But Jesse pours cold water on the idea, insisting his ex-wife would never agree to such an arrangement because of her hatred for him. The brief surge of empathy between Jesse and Celine dissipates. Preoccupied with his own guilt as a negligent father, Jesse complains that he hasn't even taught his son how *not* to throw a baseball like a girl. It's curious that he chooses sports as a measure of paternal responsibility, especially after Hank revealed a lack of interest in soccer back at the airport. In Jesse's guilt-fuelled sense of obligation reside the seeds of a future conflict between father and son. We'll never know for sure, at least within the confines of *Before Midnight*, since Hank and Jesse do not meet again. Celine's reaction, proceeding from her long-standing contempt for America in general and its preoccupation with sports in particular, hints that she would take Hank's side in such a conflict. So even if Hank came to live with them in Paris, which would presumably pre-empt a terrible argument that occurs late in the film between Jesse and Celine, their differences about how to raise the boy could lead to future conflict.

But there is another conflict brewing here, and it's not so hypothetical. Reading between the lines of Jesse's outpouring of guilt about not being with Hank during the boy's teenage years, Celine rightly or wrongly concludes that he's surreptitiously proposing a major change for their own family. "Jesse, I'm not moving to Chicago" she declares preemptively. He protests that he never asked her to do so. True, but his complaint about being a negligent father implies that solution. Celine sees it as a passive-aggressive maneuver to guilt her into making the move. We

seem to have entered a disagreement with precedents to which we were not privy. It's a little reminder that as intimate as we became with these characters in the previous two movies, we were with them for only two days out of eighteen years. Conversations were had and battles fought of which we are unaware until we encounter echoes of them in this movie.

Celine tries to reason Jesse away from what she assumes is his hidden agenda by reassuring him that he's a great father. That's not the point she made a short time ago with regard to their daughters, and therefore not very convincing now. "He loves the letters you send him" is sharply contradicted by Jesse, who claims Hank doesn't even read them. Overriding her next challenge, Jesse concludes with finality, "I just know if I miss these years, they are never coming back." That's an apocalyptic statement. Pausing to consider its implications, Celine matches it with one of her own. "Oh my God, this is where it ends. This is how people start breaking up." Jesse refuses to let Celine compare her crisis to his, accusing her of wildly inflating the danger to their relationship. Worse yet, he criticizes her choice of metaphor to describe that precarious state. She said "ticking bomb" when she should have said "time bomb." Using his comparative mastery of English to demean her lack of same is petty and unfair. But so too have been and will be again *her* expressions of contempt for his mediocre French. They've both played this little power game for many years.

Celine slips past Jesse's roadblock and restates her main point, accusing him of blaming his unhappiness on her. Mutual resentment grows. He retaliates by claiming she blows everything he says out of proportion just to shut him up. And she nearly proves his point by wondering aloud how they've lasted as long as they have. It's only been a minute or so since she laid an affectionate and reassuring hand on his shoulder. Now they're on the verge of breaking up?

Clearly a glut of pre-existing conflicts are bubbling to the surface of this originally singular dispute.

Celine reaches way back, unwittingly of course, to the very first visual metaphor of their relationship: the merging sets of railroad tracks in the opening shot of *Before Sunrise*. Their once parallel tracks have apparently gone separate ways. Reinforcing her point, she names other defunct couples they've known. Jesse protests in vain, then gives up in exasperation. "I'm kidding, and I'm *not*" Celine admits. But emphasizing the latter, she adds quietly, "This is it."

Like the itinerant poet who inadvertently saved Celine and Jesse from an argument that could have squashed their young romance on the banks of the Danube River, the waking twins unwittingly come to their parents' rescue, silencing all talk of an impending break-up. The parental instincts of both Jesse and Celine kick in immediately, perhaps given a little extra boost by feelings of guilt over what the girls might have already overheard. Like most parents do from time to time, they lie to their kids for the sake of expediency, to spare the girls disappointment but also to cover their own asses. When the girls ask why they didn't stop at the ruins, Jesse and Celine tell them the ruins were closed. Celine participates in this deception despite wanting to stop and let the girls explore in the first place. She doesn't want them to resent mom or dad for breaking a promise. Both parents assure their children they will visit the ruins on the way to the airport. Yet they agreed earlier, when they were not being overheard, that they would probably *not* stop at the ruins on the way to the airport, despite their best intentions. These are the little games people play with themselves and others in order to prevent hurt feelings and save face. At least Celine and Jesse have not degenerated to the point where they blame each other in front of the kids for things gone wrong or promises not kept.

Jesse adjusts the car's rear view mirror to get a better look at his daughters, who have suddenly become the focus of his and Celine's wayward attention. Ella inquires about her missing apple. Celine uses that opening to pressure a reluctant yet guilty Jesse to stop at the next village and pick up another one. It's a playful use of a child by one parent to manipulate the other—in this case immediately following a serious and unresolved argument between those parents. How can Jesse refuse to cater to the needs of his daughter after he complained of *not* being able to do so for his son?

The family stops at a small grocery store in a mountain village along their route. The English phrase "Super Market" appears on a sign over the door, counterpointed by many nearby non-English signs. "Tom & Jerry's" mixes with Greek words on a sign advertising ice cream. Celine's Europe is more cosmopolitan than Jesse's homeland.

The sight of Celine, Jesse and their daughters emerging from the family (well, rented) car is evocative of just about any family on vacation, in almost every country. The kids immediately dash for what interests them, as children do everywhere. Maybe it's just a coincidence that Nina and Ella exit the vehicle on the same side as their mother and opposite their father. But it adds to our growing impression that they are emotionally closer to Celine than to Jesse, as may well be Hank. Celine is clearly in charge of this little outing, in a benevolent and necessary way. She asks Jesse for the list of groceries they need for the upcoming dinner party. He cannot find it, until she informs him it's in his pocket. And so it is.

"Okay, I'm the General" Celine proclaims. "Captains" Ella and Nina enthusiastically snap to attention and salute her authority. It's a delightful game to them, at least on this occasion. It's unlikely they'll be so enthusiastic when they're teenagers. Ice cream was the first food they went

for, so perhaps they need a little adult guidance and moderation. But they clearly love their mother, who rules with a soft touch, sending both girls into the store with instructions delivered in *French*. As the preferred language for this mother/daughter trio, it's another reason for Jesse to feel left out.

Jesse interrupts Celine's orders to the troops, challenging her right to be General. Is this mutiny? She informs him her rank is self-appointed and resumes exercising authority. Jesse's challenge was merely a joke, though not entirely. He snaps to attention and tries to join his daughters in the ranks of the happily subordinate, addressing Celine respectfully in French. Identifying himself as "Captain Clean-Up," the name and rank he gave himself inside the car when she complained of his untidy habits, he presents himself for duty. Instead she reduces his rank to "Private" and orders him not to touch anything. Exiled again. Still, before joining their girls in the store, Celine gives Jesse an affectionate chuck on his chin. Superficially it's all in the spirit of family play, accentuated by music that returns to the soundtrack at the end of the scene. But lurking not far beneath the surface pleasantries is a battle between two soldiers who may no longer be on the same team.

Evoking a bittersweet nostalgia for affection that was once passionate but has since faded, the music continues into the next scene as Jesse, Celine, Ella and Nina, each carrying a bag of groceries, walk along a path along bordered by a tall stone fence towards the home of their host. The setting may be traditional European, but the family and its attire look as contemporary American as they do anything else. The girls lead the way, running towards the house. Celine follows, calling out instructions to them in French. Jesse silently brings up the rear. The bags carried by the girls are colorful. Their parents carry ordinary, plastic shopping bags, with

commensurate enthusiasm. It sucks to get old.

The camera stops and pivots, letting the girls pass by and recede into the distance while the parents catch up with us. We began the scene closer in spirit to Ella and Nina, then fall into alignment with their less carefree parents. Celine continues to call out cautionary instructions to her daughters. Jesse brings up the rear, his posture and gait vaguely suggesting discontent, or at the very least a lack of emotional involvement in the family interaction up ahead. Is he preoccupied with thoughts of his absent son? He visually counterpoints the simple, melodic, idyllic music. After Celine and the girls disappear from view, Jesse remains alone within the now static camera frame, a brief portrait of unhappiness in an otherwise picturesque setting. The camera incorporates a stone doorway to frame our image of the family at a routine moment in their lives, formalizing and giving dramatic weight to our impression of their simultaneous harmony and discord. Think back to Vienna when Jesse and Celine bounded on and off city trains with all the enthusiasm now displayed by their kids. Time and experience changed them.

On a stone-paved courtyard adjoining a house backed by a beautiful mountain view, Jesse is no longer the odd man out. He plays soccer with two women, two men and two boys about the age of Hank. This is what he yearns to do with his son. But Hank already told him he has no interest in soccer. The background music now echoes Jesse's unrealistic dreams of getting emotionally closer to the boy.

A young girl sits alone on a bench in the background. Was she not invited to play? She's not the only person missing in action. Neither Celine nor the twins are involved, which might be one reason Jesse is having such a good time. The other participants include a married, middle-aged couple and a pair of young lovers. Jesse is the only adult flying solo. But he's pretty good at this

game, stealing the ball and calling out for “my team.” He was not permitted to be part of Celine’s team back at the grocery store, despite his willingness to accept a subordinate role.

Apart from the action are an elderly couple quietly enjoying the beautiful day with convivial conversation and laughter. They are the hosts of this gathering, a prominent Greek writer named Patrick and his companion, Natalia. They’re a portrait of romantic solidarity in old age, or so it seems at first sight. They are the goal towards which Jesse and Celine are striving but may fall short of achieving.

While Jesse amuses himself with other guests, Celine and the twins pick fruit and vegetables in a nearby garden with a pleasant ocean view. Though not ostentatious, this is not the home of a pauper. The “General” sends her troops on a mission to gather fresh tomatoes in their baskets. They in turn seek advice on which tomatoes are ripe for picking, and she patiently instructs them. It’s an appealing example of parent playing teacher to her own children, but notably without Jesse’s participation.

Later that day Jesse, Patrick and Stefanos, the other middle-aged husband, are gathered together on the veranda, discussing literature. They’re very relaxed with each other. No women or children are present. It’s not by mandate an exclusively male club. But somehow, on this occasion, it worked out that way, and probably not by coincidence.

The men discuss Jesse’s first two books, *This Time* and *That Time*. Obviously he’s not immune to the lure of sequels, any more than are Richard Linklater, Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke. Jesse tells his companions about a family joke he shares with Celine and the girls. “*This* brought us back together and *That* paid for our apartment.” It’s a nice way of bringing Celine and their daughters into the scene, from which they are otherwise conspicuously absent. It’s an even nicer

hint of a shared family myth. Relations among them are clearly not all bad.

Patrick is amused by Jesse's joke. But he says little at the beginning of this scene, perhaps because, as we soon discover, he admires Jesse's third novel more than he does the first two. Why insult a guest? Stefanos, closer in age to Jesse but not a writer, offers lots of opinions. He asks if it isn't weird for Celine to be a character in *This Time*. We heard her admit as much in *Before Sunset*. Yet Jesse insists she has no problem with it *now*. As things turn out, that's either a lie or a self-deception on his part.

Stefanos prefers *That Time* to *This Time* because the sequel contains more sex, including a scene in which Jesse and Celine's fictional alter-egos go at it for days after an airline flight gets cancelled due to a blackout. Hmmm, that sounds suspiciously similar to an end-of-the-world fantasy Jesse revealed to Celine in *Before Sunset*, in which they spend their last day on earth in a hotel room, screwing like rabbits. Or should I say like monkeys, which takes us further back in time, to a story he told her in *Before Sunrise*. Patrick wants to know if Jesse really did have marathon sex. Jesse replies with a non-committal hand gesture, but his broad grin implies a big, fat "Yes!" Stefanos reacts with undisguised envy. Is he currently experiencing a lack of sex with his own wife? Does he make a distinction between Jesse and Celine's current sex life and the sexual exploits of the two younger characters in Jesse's novel? Are he and Jesse two middle-aged men a bit fixated on their fading sexual prowess and prospects, occasionally living in the past, or in a *fantasy* of the past?

Throughout this scene Stefanos plays with a soccer ball in his hand, another throwback to his and Jesse's vigorous youth and maybe one reason why Jesse is reluctant to let Hank give up on the sport. How can Jesse re-live his youth through his son if the boy won't cooperate by doing

the things Jesse once did?

Patrick adds his two cents to the conversation. An old man no longer obsessed with or perhaps even interested in sex, he states his preference for Jesse's *third* book, which dwells less on that topic. Jesse admits it took him longer to write than did the first two novels combined. Stefanos admits he never finished reading Jesse's third book, even though his wife gave him a copy. "Too long," he complains. Even its title, *Temporary Cast Members of a Long-Running But Little Seen Production of a Play Called 'Fleeting'*, suggests a deliberate departure from the first two novels. Perhaps Jesse was just trying to stretch as an artist. Is the title of his latest published work ambitious or pretentious? It depends on the audience. Obviously Stefanos agrees with the critics, a majority of whom, Jesse bemoans, thought the latter. Speaking in Greek, Patrick expounds on Jesse's writing. Jesse doesn't understand. He asks Stephanos to translate. Stefanos diplomatically but awkwardly assures Jesse the older man likes *all* of Jesse's work. Once again Linklater exploits the language limitations of part of his audience. I'm guessing that Patrick offered a less than flattering opinion of Jesse's first two books, choosing to express that opinion in Greek in order to cause less offense. If that's the case, Jesse's third book may be the only reason he and Celine received an invitation to visit Patrick's home.

Though no longer a naïve tourist hopelessly out of his element, Jesse still occasionally finds himself at a cultural disadvantage in Europe. Judging from his facial expression and tepid laughter, he suspects Stefanos lied to him about what Patrick said in order to avoid an awkward situation. Patrick shares with Jesse a passion for and knowledge of literature, which is the foundation of their friendship. Celine does not share the same passion for literature. Yet she and Patrick are both multi-lingual Europeans. And although they never gang up on the linguistically

challenged Jesse, in his mind they are probably both a little suspect on that point.

Knowing nothing about the content of Jesse's third novel, I suspect it's as autobiographical in its inspiration, albeit more cleverly disguised as something else, as were *This Time* and *That Time*. During his bookstore interview in *Before Sunset* Jesse speculated that everything is autobiographical. "We all see the world through our own tiny keyhole." Maybe the "long running" but "little seen" play is Jesse's own life, with Celine, Ella, Nina, Hank and his never-seen ex-wife as the "temporary cast members" in that "fleeting" production. It suggests a rather bleak view of life that grows ever more recognizable as we get older, grow estranged from one another and/or die off. Jesse expressed similar views in *Before Sunrise* when he tried to justify his one-night-only romance with Celine. "Why do we think that relationships are supposed to last forever anyway?" Back in 1994 he was attempting to rationalize away the pain of his imminent separation from Celine. It didn't work. Maybe now, in his choice of a title for his third book, he's reflecting painfully on his eroding relationship with the lover with whom he once strove so mightily to reconnect, traveling a second time to Vienna and then writing a novel about their one night together.

In the kitchen, meanwhile, Celine helps prepare dinner with two of the other women. Does she object to the gender stereotype? She will use her domestic chores in a later scene to berate Jesse. But if she resents them in this scene, she disguises it well, praising Patrick's "amazing" tomatoes and his "amazing" home. Is she laying on the compliments a bit thick because she's not as impressed as she pretends to be? Natalia glances at her with a hint of skepticism. Celine admits she had reservations about coming to Greece, but now that she's here insists she's reluctant to leave. She sounds sincere, though the reason she gives for not wanting to come (her fear that

Greece's long history of tragic myth would lead to something bad happening in her own life), sounds unconvincing. All three women share a laugh at Celine's stated reservations. Yet she seems genuinely comfortable in the company of these women, as Jesse does with their husbands.

Out on the veranda the male bonding continues. Jesse's shirt sleeves are rolled up and Stefanos is barefoot. They're very relaxed. Jesse describes his idea for a fourth book, which would chronicle a day in the lives of several characters, each of whom suffers from a brain malady that distorts his or her perception of reality: persistent déjà vu, the inability to recognize anyone who should be familiar, including one's self, and the false recognition of strangers. His fascination with diverse, potentially deceptive points of view carries over from his bookshop interview in Paris nine years ago. It's an abstract concept, like his musings in Vienna about the illogic of reincarnation and our misuse of spare time. And it stands in counterpoint to the women's more practical, down-to-earth discussion about food that preceded it. Stefanos latches on to one of Jesse's proposed characters, the guy who remembers and feels connected to nothing, as a model for his own life. Therein lies a personal tale we will never hear, because our attention is diverted to Achilleas and Anna, the two young lovers returning from a private swim.

The young couple has spent much of their time alone with each other rather than splitting up and each gravitating to his or her gender counterparts. Their love is still fresh, exciting, playful and full of discovery. Anna tugs at her lover's swim trunks before departing for the house. Achilleas snaps his towel at her before joining the older men on the veranda. Patrick, perhaps recalling his own youth, observes, "He's having the best summer of us all." Hank said the same thing about himself back at the airport. Jesse misunderstood the reason for his son's enthusiasm. We subsequently learned from Celine it was due to an adolescent version of the romance

Achilleas is enjoying. Patrick's comment implies that being young and in love is better than being middle-aged or old, whether in love or not.

Unknowingly validating Patrick's point, Jesse and Stefanos stare at the bikini-clad Anna as she disappears into the house. Fortunately Achilleas does not notice their sexual interest in his girlfriend. Jesse glances at Stefanos, then looks away and chuckles guiltily. Each knows exactly what the other was thinking, which will *not* be a topic of conversation with Achilleas. Celine had a point when she accused Jesse of ogling women, although that doesn't exactly qualify as cheating. Stefanos diplomatically returns to the topic of the characters in Jesse's next novel, though obviously with little interest. Jesse follows suit, unveiling a character named after Achilleas and who sees only the transient nature of everything, which is clearly *not* a preoccupation of the real Achilleas, steeped in the pleasures of a new romance. Can Jesse no longer even imagine the younger man's less jaded point of view? By naming his character after the younger man, does he try to warn Achilleas of the inevitable changes to come? But why would Achilleas want to spoil his present enthusiasm for life with what might become the depressing realities of his future? On the other hand, both Jesse and Celine pondered the transitory nature of life on their first night together, when they were both young and healthy and falling in love. Celine did so in her comments about the art of Seurat. Jesse did the same when he told her about a friend of his who had just become a father, yet couldn't stop thinking that one day his child would be dead. Maybe our main characters were old before their time.

Stefanos criticizes Jesse's latest story idea as "pretentious." Jesse promises it will be "funny" instead. But his example is a character who picks up a book and wonders who will be the last person to read it, making even the death of a *book* seem depressing. Echoing his remark in

Before Sunset about literature being autobiographical no matter how fanciful it seems on the surface, does he use his new character to express his own disillusionment with life?

Achilleas denies seeing the world the way his fictional namesake does. More crudely, Stefanos substitutes his own interest in “tits, booze and cars” for what he sees as Jesse’s obsession with death, which of course Jesse denies. Patrick jumps into the conversation to propose a character more like himself, reflecting *his* current state of mind. It’s an older character who cannot recall what he had for breakfast this morning yet clearly remembers a song he associates with a memorable incident that occurred when he was fourteen. Clearly Patrick finds it comforting to think that his point of view might be acknowledged and represented in Jesse’s next novel. Maybe We all want to *matter*, whatever our age.

Stefanos, playing with his soccer ball, tries to inject more sex into Jesse’s next book. But Jesse returns the emphasis to where he originally placed it, on the confusion of perception. Even when three of the men in this conversation can relate to one ingredient in Jesse’s embryonic story--the Marlon Brando movie *On the Waterfront*--two of them cannot warm to the rest of his concept. But Patrick, the only other writer in the group, can at least empathize with Jesse’s passion for story-telling—a passion Jesse seems to have lost for other things and people in his life. Unlike his absent son, Hank, writing is something he *can* hang onto.

The variety of contributions to Jesse’s story proposal in this scene proves Jesse’s fictional point that everyone sees life from a different angle. We are all separated from each other by gender, age, culture, inclination and even from *ourselves* over the course of time. Compare Jesse’s latest writing project to his cable access television show idea from *Before Sunrise*. A reality show about a routine day in the life of an ordinary person being observed in real time and subsequently

discussed by a worldwide audience sounds like an attempt to *overcome* rather than reaffirm the perceptual barriers that divide people. Middle-aged Jesse, contemplating his fourth novel, is less hopeful.

While Jesse and his male buddies ponder the meaning of life, and Celine and her female friends do the same in their own way, the children of some of these adults display a joyful *lack* of concern about perceptual differences, time, loss of memory, and death. Three girls and two boys play happily in Patrick's courtyard. Background music echoes their carefree attitude. Achilleas and Anna are closer in spirit to the children than to Jesse, Celine, Stefanos, Ariadne, Patrick and Natalia. Though it's curious that by the end of this brief scene the three girls occupy one side of the camera frame while the two boys occupy the other, exhibiting the same gender division as do their elders. Do differences of perception start so early? Or is the division merely passing and coincidental?

In the kitchen Celine and Ariadne have a minor disagreement about how to stuff a tomato. French custom versus Greek custom. Having experienced a number of America versus Europe clashes with Celine over the years, Jesse might enjoy this little intra-European culture clash, if he were here. Ariadne cautions her French acquaintance not to overstuff the tomatoes. Celine seems a trifle annoyed, but politely says nothing.

Stefanos enters the kitchen and stands between the two women, doing his miniscule part to help prepare dinner. Contradicting his wife, he assures Celine she's doing a fine job. Is he retaliating against Ariadne for some slight, real or imagined, she inflicted on him recently? Or is he flirting with Celine? Maybe it's the way he says "fine" that hints at flirtation. If he's too old to flirt with Anna, maybe he thinks Celine is fair game, up to a point. Ariadne undercuts his

culinary credibility with ease, pointing out that he's never prepared this or any other dish. So the culture clash between two women from different countries is displaced by the everlasting gender divide between husband and wife. Celine will make similar complaints about Jesse.

While undermining her husband, Ariadne takes a drag from her cigarette. That habit may predate her marriage to Stephanos. Or it may be a more recent development, serving to soothe her irritation at his inclination to flirt with other women. In *Before Sunset* both Celine and Jesse exhibited a smoking habit they did not have in *Before Sunrise*. Did Jesse's unhappy marriage and Celine's unsatisfying romances have anything to do with it. We don't spend enough time with Ariadne and Stefanos to make an educated guess.

Stefanos swipes his wife's knife to slice a piece of food he's working on. She promptly reclaims it, and they begin to bicker in their native language. They grin while briefly struggling for the sharp utensil. Is this just harmless, affectionate horseplay between two loving partners? Celine, mildly alarmed, tells them to stop fighting with knives. She grins, yet sounds half-serious. Ariadne assures her that she and Stefanos are "negotiating," not fighting, which may be the truth. We just don't know enough about their past or their habits to have an informed opinion. Like the older couple who trade verbal jabs in the courtyard of Celine's apartment building, near the end of *Before Sunset*, Ariadne and Stefanos may be the relaxed, loving, good-humored middle aged couple we later discover Jesse and Celine are *not*. Or they may be what Jesse and Celine *are*. But they claim to have a system of give and take that works. And as if to demonstrate that system, Stefanos borrows his wife's cigarette for a puff, just as he previously borrowed her knife. Ariadne almost immediately reclaims it, as she tried to do with the knife. Celine remains skeptical.

Is it possible Ariadne initiated a tiny dispute with Celine, over how to stuff a tomato, because she sensed her husband's sexual attraction to Celine and resented it? And did Stefanos really make his way into the kitchen to help prepare the meal? Or was he pursuing Anna, and in her absence flirted with Celine instead? All of these possibilities are well beneath the surface action. But long-established partners often read and occasionally *misread* each other at a remarkably subtle level.

Anna wanders back into the kitchen, casually leaning against the refrigerator and munching on an apple. Is she playing Does she play tempting Eve to Stefanos's Adam? Or is that how Ariadne sees her? She shows no interest in helping the older women prepare the meal. Is she rebelling against a gender stereotype? Rebelling against an older generation within her own gender? Selfishly lazy? None of the above? Passing by Anna, Celine involves her in Ariadne and Stephanos's "system" debate. Anna makes a rude hand gesture that mildly shocks Celine, who responds in kind and exits the kitchen. What's the story between these two characters? If there's tension between them, does it involve Jesse? Has Celine observed him flirting with her? Ambivalent moments like this remind us that we joined Celine and Jesse at the tail end of their vacation in Greece. Whatever occurred prior to Hank's departure is for us mostly a matter of conjecture. And like Jesse's proposed fourth novel, that conjecture comes to us by way of the reactions and dialog of a group of characters with a wide diversity of perspectives.

Stefanos looks at Anna and jokes, "We used to have *that* system" (insulting hand gestures), while pointing to Ariadne and himself. He's flirting with Anna in Celine's absence, and she responds in kind. We discretely exit the kitchen and the scene before we get Ariadne's reaction. Do she and Stefanos have an argument about his flirtation when they are alone? Does the matter

simmer unspoken until much later, only to inflame an unrelated disagreement? Or is it a passing incident of no lasting consequence to either?

The music of childhood innocence returns as Jesse brings his daughters and the three children of Ariadne and Stefanos down to the beach near Patrick's residence. He carries a large, inflatable alligator for the children to use as a float. The facsimile of a deadly predator is deployed as a harmless, fun toy. Most loving parents try to shield their children from the nasty realities of life. But as he watches them play in the ocean, Jesse cautions the children not to swim out too far. After all, there are *real* predators out there, somewhere.

Still scrutinizing the children from shore, Jesse pulls out his cell phone and checks it. Perhaps he's hoping for a call from Hank, whom he can no longer protect in person, and who seems less interested in communicating with him than he does with Celine. The music now echoes his sadness at that separation as much as it does the innocence of the children in the water. Pictured against the bleak backdrop of a rocky cliff, he says nothing to anyone about his pain and regret. When he did earlier to Celine, the result was a nasty argument. Jesse still wears his black t-shirt emblazoned with the word "Neptune," referring to the ancient Greek god of the sea. Despite the picturesque setting, sunny blue sky and beautiful water, Jesse doesn't seem very powerful at this moment in the movie, though he is undoubtedly a reassuring figure in the eyes of his two seafaring daughters and their friends.

The meal hosted by Patrick begins with a shot of an anonymous servant carrying a tray back up a stone stairway to the house. We don't even see her face. She's just a quick reminder of other, less privileged but no less important lives passing in and out of the ongoing story of our main characters. No doubt each of the servants has a private tale to tell, but this is neither the time nor

the place for those stories.

The more privileged characters dine under an arched enclosure open to the air on three sides. Patrick sits at the head of the table. Achilleas sits opposite his grandfather. The other adults are arranged along the sides, with each couple seated together. The children are conveniently exiled to a separate dining area. Clinking his glass for attention, which also silences the background music, Jesse offers a formal and very generous toast to Patrick, their gracious host. It's a fine, idyllic tribute, making reference to Hank's earlier comment about this summer in Greece being the best of his life. Patrick is touched. Celine nods in affirmation of Jesse's story, yet previously informed Jesse that Hank was really speaking of his first romantic experience, not about the graciousness of their host. Nevertheless, she participates in Jesse's polite deception, which gets a rousing endorsement from the other dinner guests. If the children were here, they might naively expose Jesse's lie and embarrass their elders.

Several camera shots depict Celine and Jesse as an almost perfect couple, nine years into their shared lives and eighteen into their acquaintance. Patrick responds in kind to Jesse's complimentary toast, then jokes about his false impression of the younger man when they first met, at the airport. "No way a man dressed like that could be a man of letters" claims the host. What *should* a "man of letters" dress like, according to Patrick's preconception? Everyone laughs. Smiling at Jesse, Celine gives him an affectionate nudge: perhaps reminding him of her own playful remarks about his slovenly appearance. Their argument about Hank and moving to Chicago seems very remote, for the time being. Patrick adds to the charm of his reply by paying an even greater compliment to Celine, describing her as more "interesting" than Jesse and triggering congratulatory "Ahhh's" all around. Everyone is *performing* now, participating in a

collective, ritualistic ode to conviviality. Officially endorsing Patrick's compliment, Jesse leans over and kisses Celine. Matching their host's lighthearted humor, she says to Jesse, "I keep telling you."

Competing with Jesse to make the most memorable toast, Patrick continues on to include Jesse and Celine's two vivacious daughters and even the late husband of his current companion, Natalia. Not a discouraging word to be heard, yet. This is social harmony on a fairly sophisticated level, not so much phony as willfully blind to complications in the lives of those engaged in it. And after all, who wants to be reminded of those complications *all* the time?

Celine is the first to break with protocol. She and then Jesse apologize for an unfortunate incident involving their daughters and Patrick's garden. Patrick dismisses their concern. But will he and Natalia discuss the incident in less forgiving terms after their guests depart? Maybe they've already discussed it, during a private moment. In the dining car on the train to Vienna Jesse made a disparaging remark about the waiter after the waiter was out of earshot. Later in this movie, in a hotel room rented for them by Stephanos and Ariadne, Celine will have unkind things to say about their well-meaning friends.

Achilleas interrupts Celine and Jesse's apology to offer his own (competing?) toast, thanking his grandfather for inviting him and Anna to his home. Matching Patrick's light touch of humor, he credits Anna's presence for encouraging Patrick to finally let him sit at the grown-up's table, which triggers another round of clinking glasses and self-congratulations. But maybe Achilleas has waited a long time to earn his adult stripes in the eyes of his famous relative, and is a little resentful of the delay.

Celine kicks off the post-toast, normal conversation by inquiring how long Anna and Achilleas

have been together. It's only been a year. Anna is an actor. She and Achilleas met at a party following her performance as Perdita in a stage production of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*. It's not surprising that the grandson of a famous writer would share the elder's interest in the arts, in spite of living in his grandfather's intimidating shadow for so many years.

Stefanos praises Anna's performance. Based on his earlier remarks about Jesse's novels, *A Winter's Tale* does not sound like his cup of tea. Are his compliments to Anna sincere, or is he flirting with her again? Patrick offers up a quote from the play in order to extend his own compliments. If Stephanos were less polite he might criticize such praise as pretentious, as he earlier described Jesse's third novel. Patrick is as much a performer as is Anna, playing the part of the grand old man of letters, always ready with a suitably famous quote from a suitably famous source, then happily collecting applause for coming up with it. Stephanos obligingly pays their host his due, telling Patrick he performed the line better than did the actor who spoke it in the play. This dinner conversation *is* a play, with plenty of subtext.

Achilleas describes his first night with Anna, driving around together on his motorcycle until dawn. That sounds similar to Jesse and Celine wandering around Vienna all night. Both young couples experienced a heady mixture of growing attraction, sharing past experiences and current outlooks on life, occasionally disagreeing, perhaps even to the point of almost breaking up, getting a little bored with each other at times, yet pressing through to forge a lasting connection. But nearly twenty years after Vienna, Jesse is less interested in comparing first-night romantic experiences than in learning more details about the make and model of Achilleas's motorcycle. Feeling the encroachment of middle age, Jesse perhaps gets a vicarious boost from that aspect of the younger man's adventure.

The first night shared by Achilleas and Anna concluded back at the theatre where Anna had performed. There the two young lovers exchanged roles: she sitting in the audience while he whispered to her from the stage. Whispered what? Jesse wants to know. He *is* interested in more than the motorcycle. Or maybe he's collecting material for a future writing project. We *all* want to know the answer to his question. But the younger couple, embarrassed by the collective attention suddenly focused on their love life, hesitates. Their elders laugh. Perhaps because they've all gone through the experience of being quizzed about their love lives, they back off.

After their first evening together Anna and Achilleas have kept in touch with each other long-distance by skyping. They even fall asleep together by way of laptop computers and the internet. Celine and Jesse, by contrast, deliberately avoided communicating with each other after parting in Vienna, fearing they would end up failing like so many other long-distance relationships. But by avoiding contact they instead failed to reconnect in Vienna six months later. Either way there are pitfalls and advantages.

Anna and Achilleas chose the more conventional if high-tech approach to romance, and at first glance seem to be functioning just fine as a couple after a year. They can still have fun over so simple a thing as Anna's face freezing into a distorted expression on Achilleas's laptop after they've said goodnight long-distance. Skyping offers a more intimate link between lovers than the technology Jesse and Celine possessed and rejected in their heyday.

Stefanos lives up, or down, to expectations by inquiring whether or not the younger couple has engaged in cybersex. He disguises the nature of his question only slightly by employing the euphemism "go a little crazy," but his meaning is obvious. Ariadne jokingly chides her husband's vulgarity. No one at the table seems offended, least of all the young couple being

interrogated by everyone and photographed by Ariadne. Nevertheless, Stefanos re-phrases his question in more objective, quasi-intellectual, scientific terms. Perhaps he's mocking the literary pretensions of Patrick and Jesse. Only a short time ago, on the veranda, Patrick advised Jesse to ignore the opinions of Stefanos because the latter only makes bicycles for a living. Though meant to be amusing, it was also slightly condescending. Who could blame Stefanos for getting a little revenge.

We observe Stefanos and Ariadne within a foreground frame formed by the heads of Jesse and Celine. Do they perceive Stefanos and his antics the same way or differently? Stefanos expands the scope of his favorite topic, describing future sex as a virtual reality experience substituting machine-to-genitals contact for the old fashioned method. All fantasies and preferences will be attainable. Is he describing a dystopian nightmare or a utopian paradise? He seems to have given the matter a great deal of thought, like Jesse and his cable television idea in *Before Sunrise*.

Poor Patrick, for whom the dinner conversation has fallen far from its rarefied, circumspect beginnings, hangs his head in his hands in reaction to the speculations of Stefanos. Celine, on the other hand, chimes in, "I might like that." Is she merely joking? Or is she subtly signaling dissatisfaction with her own sex life? A later, private discussion between Celine and Jesse suggests to the latter. Of course an outsider can pick apart *any* conversation and analyze it to death. It's only a *possibility*, to be discounted or confirmed by the accumulation of other evidence. The larger point of this film and its two predecessors is that conversations, and relationships as a whole, are complex, living things filled with puzzling twists and turns, double meanings, nuances, echoes of the past and prognostications of things to come. No one, not even two people who know each other more intimately than *we* could ever know them, get it right all

the time.

Gesturing towards their embarrassed host, Jesse chides Celine for abetting the “vulgar” turn of their dinner table conversation. And what must Patrick’s servant be thinking as she serves up more plates of food? Does she even care? Will she discuss it and other salacious bits of dinner conversation with her co-workers?

Achilleas and Anna, young people more comfortable with modern technology than is Patrick, side with Stefanos, acknowledging that more and more human experiences will be filtered through electronics. Anna raises another possibility in this brave new world. How will writers feel when a computer can write a novel better than *War and Peace*? This initially amicable dinner chat is becoming a verbal skirmish between generations and genders. Patrick insists Anna’s prediction will never come true. Grinning, Achilleas contradicts him, insisting it’s only be a matter of time. Has he really thought through the ramifications of such a technological ascendancy? Or does his desire to score a short-term victory over his famous grandfather blind him to the danger of what he insists it coming true? If computers eventually outperform authors, why not also actors, including his beloved Anna? Stefanos already mentioned a virtual Marilyn Monroe as the perfect answer to his sexual fantasies. Film itself was once considered a radical new invention that threatened traditional literature, which has since proven to be an exaggeration.

Jesse, who moments earlier sided with Patrick against Celine, Anna, Achilleas and Stefanos, steps in to now defend the latter four and contradict Patrick, pointing out that computers can now beat even the best human chess players, which was once presumed impossible. The death of writing by human beings like himself perhaps validates his longstanding sense of everything and

everyone being “transitory.” When Celine introduced that theme into Linklater’s trilogy, way back in Vienna, her point was instantly validated. The Seurat exhibit she used to illustrate her point had already left Vienna before she and Jesse saw the poster that advertised it.

The previously complimentary dinner guests appear to be ganging up on Patrick. Even Celine chimes in with a story supporting Jesse’s gloomy outlook for humanity. A lab rat was given the opportunity to artificially induce its own orgasms and in effect screwed itself to death. Jesse laughs in concurrence, as do most of the others. The pathetic downfall of humanity can make for pleasant dinner conversation, as long as the participants are not directly affected. In Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, another diverse group of characters sits around after dinner discussing in amused fashion a husband who murdered his wife because she changed the television channel he was watching. Almost *anything* can be entertaining, once removed.

Patrick tries to outflank his opponents by making an asset of his advanced age and greater experience. “Every generation believes that it’s witnessing the end of the world” sounds like an effective rebuttal of the gleeful gloom and doom spouted by his younger guests. But then he adds, “I feel that I’m actually living it,” which sound like more gloom and doom. Is he referring to his own approaching death? Or is he unwittingly validating his first statement, proving himself an old curmudgeon by bemoaning the moral decay of a younger generation that seems so inferior to his own?

If at the start of this scene there was an undercurrent of competition to offer the most generous and memorable toast, that competition rises to the surface when Jesse directly challenges Patrick’s pessimistic assessment of his juniors. Ironically, he doesn’t do so with optimism. Instead he admits his own generation, as well as that of Achilleas and Anna, is “pleasure-

obsessed, porn-addled [with a nod towards Stefanos] and materialistic,” while computers are becoming sentient. But he questions Patrick’s core notion of the “self” within humanity. Patrick fires back with a famous quote from ancient Greek philosophy: “Know thyself.” Jesse counters that most of what Patrick considers the self consists of blind, automated functions. Is this an argument between Humanist and Behaviorist? And is Jesse, like Achilleas before him, shooting himself in the foot by asserting a point of view that devalues *everyone*, including himself?

While Jesse lectures Patrick about the lowly state of human beings in general, Celine mutters “Speak for yourself.” Dissent rises from within the ranks of the middle-aged. Moments later she interrupts him, displacing Patrick as Jesse’s main opposition. Competition between two writer/intellectual friends suddenly becomes a *family* dispute. If the self is such a small part of what we are as human beings, why, Celine inquires sarcastically, does she hear so much about Jesse’s? Touche! Patrick is pleased by the sneak attack of his unexpected champion, because it skewers *his* foe. In all likelihood Celine challenges Jesse on her own behalf, not to rescue Patrick. But to Patrick it feels like he’s found an ally.

All alliances are in flux now as Stefanos re-enters the fray on his own terms. Comparing the self to his penis, he acknowledges its meager size in comparison with the rest of his body, but insists it “needs a lot of attention.” Is he siding with Celine or Jesse? Everyone laughs. But it is Celine who capitalizes on his remark, pointing towards Jesse and exclaiming “His too!” Jesse shakes his head in amused defeat. The Celine/Jesse confrontation is defused, perhaps unwittingly, by Stefanos. But now that their relationship has been inserted into the general dinner conversation, it’s open to public interrogation, as was that of Anna and Achilleas earlier. Anna herself repeats a question she and her boyfriend were asked, inquiring how Celine and Jesse met.

Stefanos tells her to read Jesse's book, which he probably doesn't know is a controversial topic for our couple.

We learned in Paris that Celine had issues with Jesse's fictionalized account of how they became acquainted. The intimacy with which he described their sex life still irritates her, since it's the first thing she mentions about the novel. It's also, to Celine's dismay, the main point of interest for Stefanos, who tries to disguise that interest behind literary pretence for which he in fact has only contempt. "I mean, it's well-written" he says of Jesse's second novel. But we learned earlier, on the veranda, the real reason Stephanos liked the book.

Taking Stefanos's comment at face value, as it was clearly not meant to be taken, Jesse uses it as an opportunity to recapture control of the conversation, which he lost earlier to Celine. In a conciliatory, inoffensive way he describes meeting Celine eighteen years earlier, falling in love with her (she grudgingly concedes that point), losing track of her for nearly a decade, then running into her again by chance.

Celine re-takes the lead, correcting Jesse's version of *their* story. A story Jesse appropriated and made public by writing two novels about it. They didn't just "run into each other" in Paris, as Jesse described it. The book Jesse wrote about their Vienna adventure brought them back together. Anna finds that fact romantic but Celine does not, because Jesse wrote the book while he was married to another woman and had a child with her. "It was a disaster" claims Celine. "No, it was inevitable" insists Jesse. The two of them, innocently set off by Anna and Stefanos, openly bicker about their Paris reunion and its consequences. Dinner conversation has gone from polite formalities to a public airing of private grievances. The tension between them was there all along, but now their masks of politeness have slipped a little. Celine reveals parts of the story *not*

in Jesse's book, including the birth of twins resulting from their first unprotected sex. We discover later those births almost cost Celine her life, and *did* cause her many doubts about her competence as a mother. Offended, Jesse retaliates by bragging about his reproductive prowess. *Acting* like a sexist jerk has been and will continue to be his way of mocking her implied accusations that he is, in fact, a sexist jerk. He twists the knife further by doing so with a sports analogy he knows Celine will hate. Jesse directs his sexual boast at Stefanos, with whom he has had several differences of opinion but who for the moment is a convenient ally against Celine, who has criticized both as aging lotharios.

Anna comes to the rescue. Changing the subject of conversation by complimenting the beauty of Ella and Nina, she appeals successfully to the proud mother in Celine, who even nudges Jesse affectionately. But it's only a brief diversion. On the pretext of giving Anna advice on how to keep a man happy, Celine tells her to let Achilleas win at "all the silly little games they like." Illustrating her point, she mentions the pinball game she and Jesse played in Vienna, claiming she let him win that contest. He denies it. As *I* recall that scene from *Before Sunrise*, neither Celine nor Jesse played pinball for the sake of beating one another. Instead they used the game as a device through and around which they carried on a very revealing and healthy conversation about their most recent romantic failures. Pinball became a kind of lubricant for their mutual confessions of disappointment, pain and resentment, as well as a modest physical release for their anger. The pinball scene was a wonderfully clarifying episode for them, making it possible for them to get more deeply involved with each other.

Celine compounds her insult by referring to Jesse as a "closet macho who would be impotent if she didn't let him win all the time. "He dreams of having a bimbo for a wife." "It's my greatest

aspiration” Jesse punches back, deliberately antagonizing her by pretending to be what she accused him of being. With false smiles on their faces, they perform their own stage play for an astounded audience. Celine is the more aggressive of the two, perhaps because Jesse has already written and published *his* version of their story for a worldwide audience. After living for years as a figment of Jesse’s imagination, she is now re-writing the whole production, in *her* terms.

Celine enacts the role of the “bimbo” she insists Jesse prefers, exaggerating for effect. She gushes over him being an author, pretending to barely know what a book is. Not quite certain how to respond, Jesse nervously plays along with her revised scenario. Anna and Achilleas watch in fascination, dumbfounded at this display of middle-aged romantic hostility, just as Jesse and Celine were at the argument played out between a middle-aged couple on board the train to Vienna. Thus the first scene in *Before Sunrise* becomes a preview of Jesse and Celine eighteen years later. Will Jesse and Celine in turn become a preview of Achilleas and Anna in a couple decades? Will the younger couple even make it that far?

Challenging the very foundation of his literary fame, Celine concludes that so brilliant an author as Jesse must have a really big penis. We don’t yet know why she makes this connection between mindless female hero-worship, Jesse’s celebrity status and sex. That nasty revelation comes later, when they’re alone. But by introducing the subject now, in front of a group of relatively new acquaintances, she violates the social protocol that initially governed their dinner table conversation.

Mocking Celine’s vengeful efforts, Jesse plays along with her fiction, planting a fat kiss on her cheek and pretending to be very attracted to her bimbo persona. It’s such a naked exhibition of thinly veiled hostility between them that even Stefanos is stunned. “Wow!” he mouths silently,

exactly as Jesse did in reaction to the argument between the middle-aged Austrian couple on the train to Vienna. The spectators, Jesse and Celine, have become the spectacle. Ariadne indelicately snaps a photo of the combatants, recording their awkward moment for posterity. Remember Celine criticizing her photojournalist boyfriend, in *Before Sunset*, for photographing war atrocities? Jesse once snapped an imaginary photo of Celine in Vienna, after they danced to the music of a harpsichord. That was a very romantic moment, made poignant by their imminent parting. How times have changed. Even in the car on the way to Patrick's house Jesse objected to Celine taking his photo as evidence that he stole an apple from their daughter.

Up to this point the airing of dirty laundry has been couched in indirect terms, with at least a veneer of playfulness. But now Celine pushes the conflict beyond any pretence of fun, disclosing to their host and fellow guests the argument she and Jesse had in the car earlier today, not ten or twenty years ago. An argument she herself described as potentially fatal to their relationship. By introducing the topic of Hank, which she knows is very private and painful to Jesse, she throws aside all restraint, openly accusing him of trying to deprive her of "an amazing new job" opportunity by moving their family to Chicago so they can "babysit every other weekend for his ex-wife." There is no disguising the vindictiveness of her assault.

Celine's emotions get the better of her. "Amazing new job" is not how she originally described her possible career change. It was then more a reluctant concession, going back to work for a male boss she despised the first time around only because she's frustrated with her current job. And as for the demeaning job of babysitting Hank, Celine herself suggested that she and Jesse try to get permanent custody of the boy, which would make her not just an occasional babysitter but a full-time stepmother.

Embarrassed by Celine's public exposure of their private problems, Jesse defends himself quietly, claiming with some justification that he only said he missed Hank, not that he wanted to drag Celine off to Chicago. He thought they were merely having a discussion, not that he had issued an ultimatum. Then again, Celine has spent nearly a decade with Jesse. She may know more about his methods of getting his way than do we.

Everyone else at the table recognizes the situation has gotten out of hand. And just as Anna did earlier, Ariadne now intervenes to change the direction of the conversation, from arguing over Hank to agreeing how difficult it must have been to say goodbye to him. Calming down, even Celine admits it was. Achilleas reinforces Ariadne's effort, bringing a smile to Jesse's face by telling him he already misses the boy, who had become his chess partner. Ariadne goes even further, making fun of Jesse and Celine's blow-up by pretending to break up with Stefanos. She'll get custody of the children, she insists. Stefanos plays along with her fiction, boasting that he'll be busy with his new, much younger girlfriend. They're only joking, for the sake of restoring peace to the table. And they succeed. Even Celine cracks a smile. But is there anything more substantial lurking behind the thematic consistency of their jokes? Has there been infidelity in *their* relationship? Ariadne and Stephanos share what appears to be an affectionate kiss and hug. And yet, what happens next hints at the gender tension between them.

Ariadne tells an educational story about men and women, directed at the youngest couple at the table, but maybe at Celine and Jesse as well. Before she commences, Stefanos reacts less than enthusiastically. "Oh, *that* story" he grumbles, as though he's heard it many times before and has long since wearied of it. Yet he dutifully promises to listen, after being scolded by his wife. In Vienna, Jesse speculated that Celine would eventually grow tired of hearing him tell the same

old stories, again and again. She protested otherwise, insisting that familiarity would breed ever stronger love. Does Stefanos's reaction to his wife's oft-repeated story prove that Jesse was right? Even after promising to be attentive, Stefanos mocks his wife by mouthing her exact words as she speaks them, drawing an embarrassed laugh from Anna. Ariadne playfully clamps her hand over her husband's annoying mouth.

Ariadne tells everyone her mother was a nurse who attended to patients coming out of coma after suffering serious injury. The female patients always inquired first about the well-being of their loved ones. Male patients were more concerned about the condition of their cocks. Everyone laughs. Order is restored. And yet Ariadne has basically *echoed* Celine's complaint about Jesse, who jokingly sides with Stephanos. "You gotta make sure it's still there" he protests. Yet these same two men implicitly *disagreed* about the priority of sex when they discussed Jesse's novels on the veranda. In the presence of an attack on their gender by women, they make common cause.

Celine, predictably, sides with Ariadne. Anna joins in with a chant of "Penis! Penis! Penis!" Jesse retaliates. If a man is biologically programmed the way women claim, why do women bother trying to change them? Stefanos eagerly jumps on that bandwagon. But Celine, reacting as if she has heard Jesse's reasoning a thousand times before, like Stefanos reacting to his wife's all-too-familiar story, facetiously pronounces Jesse a "genius" at twisting everything around in his favor.

If the middle aged couples think *they* are cynical about romance, Anna and Achilleas now surpass and surprise them, claiming the whole notion of a relationship lasting forever is absurd. They claim to *know* they will eventually break up, as Anna's parents already have. His parents

would have, he insists, if they'd the money to do so. Such pessimism comes too easily to this young couple. If they do eventually split, will they react so blithely to it? Or will they cling desperately to a dying memory until they give up and turn bitter? Remember Jesse and Celine, with equal emotional detachment, discussing how men and women eventually stop listening to each other as time rolls on, and later rationalizing away the notion of a long-term romance in order to diminish the pain of their own imminent separation. And yet within fewer than twenty four hours they had fallen in love with each other and made romantic plans to reunite in precisely six months.

Anna tells the story of her great grandmother's dying letter to the family, in which she wrote extensively about her job as a seamstress and her good friends, but almost nothing about her husband. That sounds like Celine's grandmother confessing to her that for decades she'd been in love with a man other than her husband. The grass is always greener elsewhere. Ariadne agrees, adding that in choosing Stefanos she "set the bar very low." He concurs, apparently not offended. How easily everyone admits defeat in the wake of Celine and Jesse's brief outburst of antagonism. Intellectually it's an easy game to play. Emotionally, not so much.

Anna appeals to Patrick for an encouraging word about the love of his life, his late wife. The great humanist, in his own way, contributes to the general consensus. He and his wife were always *two*, never *one*. They met in the middle when it was convenient for both. Ariadne compounds Patrick's pessimism, claiming that Stefanos tries to "colonize" her and she in turn does the same to him. Yet they lock hands in a blatantly romantic gesture, despite the fact that Stefanos describes "man" as short for "maniac." Ariadne leans affectionately against his shoulder, though playfully bites his wrist at the same time. We've seen few such demonstrations

of affection, mixed or not, between Celine and Jesse lately. The dinner table debate about love and romance is never resolved.

Celine whispers privately to Jesse about cancelling the hotel room Ariadne and Stefanos rented for them. Clearly she doesn't *want* a romantic evening alone with Jesse while their children remain with Patrick and the others. Annoyed at Celine's impolitic request, Jesse apologetically asks if their generous friends would mind if he and Celine decline their gift. But in the face of strong resistance, he and Celine tactfully back down. Propriety rules.

Remaining silent for nearly the entire conversation, Natalia finally speaks her piece about relationships between men and women, a topic the rest of them had already left behind. Her contribution is more of an afterthought, as though she had absorbed everyone else's comments and carefully pondered them before contributing her own. When her husband was alive, she discloses, she felt "safe, complete," often because of the simplest things he did or they shared. It's a very romantic view of love, and perhaps for that reason seems to fascinate the younger couples, who have so glibly dismissed such notions. It's also, inevitably, a tragic view of love, since Natalia lost what she treasured, and perhaps treasures even more in remembrance. And because of her advanced age, she is starting to forget those familiar things that she found most endearing about her husband. Like Celine, in Vienna, insisting she would love a man even more by "knowing what he would say in every situation," Natalia fondly recalls how her late husband reacted to even the most trivial things, such as reminding her to put on her scarf in rainy weather. But memories fade. She is becoming one of the characters in Jesse's proposed fourth book, acutely aware of the transitory nature of everything. She is Celine's interpretation of Seurat's artistic vision. Or Celine herself, pondering the forgotten girl buried in the Cemetery of the

No-Names.

Natalia fights against memory loss, knowing that in the end it's a losing battle. Sometimes she conjures up a detailed image of her late husband at sunrise or sunset, when the light is just right, which is reminiscent of Jesse envisioning his dead grandmother in the sunlit spray of a garden hose. Natalia understands that everyone is just "passing through." But because of her keen, private sense of loss, she is not as flippant about the folly of romantic love as are the other people gathered around the dinner table, including even her equally aged, substitute husband, Patrick, who by his own admission was never as close to his first wife as Natalia was to her first husband.

We view the conclusion of Natalia's tale of lost love from a position between Celine and Jesse. He takes her hand in his. She does not pull hers back. For a fleeting moment, despite their recent bickering and long-standing acrimony, they remember what they once meant to each other, and maybe, on some level, still do. Jesse proposes a heartfelt toast to "passing through." Everyone concurs, echoed the background music that returns at the end of this scene. It's a more sincere, meaningful toast than those offered at the beginning of the scene. Our final image of Natalia shows her sipping from her wine glass, a wistful expression on her face, surrounded by the raised glasses of three younger couples who have not yet tasted the acute loss she has. Is she thinking of her long-lost husband? In any case, she's probably *not* thinking about Patrick, who is a bit of a cold fish.

You can bet the farm that Jesse and Celine's dinner battle will become a hot topic of discussion and speculation by the other three couples (well, maybe not Natalia and Patrick) when they have a private moment *as* couples. Music bridges the scenes as we join *our* couple walking and talking through the ancient ruins they promised to show their daughters. Like the location, the

instrument on which that music is performed switches from piano to either guitar or mandolin. Celine and Jesse are less hostile now, in the aftermath of Natalia's sad story about losing her husband. But lessons learned, even re-learned, are easily forgotten. These two characters have been traveling on thin ice since the film began. The ancient ruins through which they stroll are a metaphorical reminder of their own shared but not identically recollected history. Vienna, Paris and many other other places and events inform their present conversation.

For the first time since Paris we accompany Celine and Jesse on a walk-and-talk with no other major characters around to influence the flow of their dialog. Jesse describes an episode from his proposed fourth book in which an old man daydreams that he is a young boy, until he sees his reflection in a window. Celine listens with interest, but they're not quite on the same page, so to speak. When he began, she thought he was telling her a different, happy, funny story about a fifty year old man with an imaginary friend. Jesse recalls the name of that story, but seems disappointed that Celine likes it. Evidently it's not one of his favorites. Their minor difference of opinion about one of his lesser works both echoes and foreshadows a much bigger disagreement between them about his first two novels and their fictional account of what happened in Vienna. If the Greek ruins reflect the burden of the past on the present, clearly these two characters do not recall that past in precisely the same way.

Consider a letter Jesse wrote at age twenty to his forty year old self--a letter he once let Celine read. Their discussion about it hints of the intimacy they've shared over the previous nine years—an intimacy about which we, the audience, are largely ignorant. The first thing that pops into Jesse's mind about that letter is that his younger self hoped his older self never got divorced, which unfortunately he did. Celine doesn't remember that part of the letter at all. Why would

she? If Jesse hadn't divorced his wife, Celine and he would not have gotten together in the way they did. Instead she recalls everything *else* in the letter. And based on that recollection she surmises that Jesse is the same person now as when he wrote it. "We always think we're evolving, but maybe we can't change that much." She might not remember it, but nine years ago, in Paris, she told Jesse about re-reading the diary she kept as a teenager and realizing that except for a few trivial changes her outlook on life had remained the same.

Contradicting Celine without seeming to realize it, and minus the hostility they exhibited towards each other at dinner, Jesse claims he *has* changed since he wrote the letter. As a young man he wanted time to speed up so he could be free of the usual restrictions on youth, including parents and school. But as an adult he wants everything to slow down. Addressing the same topic, but in different terms, Celine describes her perception of her own life as dreamlike. "You've always thought that" remarks Jesse fondly. Each remembers some details of the way the other thought about life in the distant past. And whether or not they realize it at this moment, that intimacy is precisely what Natalia referred to when she spoke of knowing how her late husband would react in even the most trivial of situations. Maybe Celine was right when she claimed, nearly twenty years ago, that she could love a man even more when she became as familiar with his habits as Natalia was with her late husband's. But do either Celine or Jesse remember that ancient conversation in Vienna?

Jesse picks up the conversational ball and runs with it. He feels more "humbled" each year by the realization of how much he doesn't know and never will. Giving him a playful nudge, Celine adds, "That's what I keep telling you. You know nothing." "I know. I'm comin' around" he agrees. They laugh. This is a relaxing, enjoyable respite from the tumultuous dinner scene. The

characters are at their best with each other now, sharing recollections and stories, joking in a healthy rather than hurtful manner, disclosing and soothing each other's anxieties. Jesse returns Celine's affectionate nudge. She continues on in the same spirit, assuring him that "Not knowing is not so bad. The point is to be looking, searching. Stay hungry, right?" He concurs, again.

Jesse changes the topic of conversation to himself and his writer friends when they were young and confident, believing it was their time to do great things--the fulfillment of a vision he told Celine about in a Viennese alley. "But you were all a bunch of arrogant little pricks, right?" Celine jokes, rather harshly. "No!" Jesse protests, matching her grin. They're still in friendly territory, but with a whiff of discord. Jesse half-concedes Celine's point, with the proviso that a little delusional arrogance may be necessary to sustain motivation and not be overwhelmed by the ever-growing realization of one's own ignorance.

Gender distinctions arise when Celine describes young men as obsessed with comparing themselves and their achievements with other men, and too often finding themselves lacking. Women, she insists, don't do that, partly because they've been held back by men for so long they have fewer role models for comparison, and also because they're so busy raising children they don't begin their creative years until later in life. There is implied resentment of men in her words, though not in her tone of voice. And as if to defuse any potential conflict with Jesse, she describes women's plight as "kind of freeing" because of the lack of role models against which to compare and belittle themselves.

"What about Joan of Arc?" Jesse counters. Bad choice. She was "burned at the stake and a virgin. Nothing I aspire to" responds Celine. True. But *her* examples of *male* role models, Martin

Luther King and Ghandi, were both assassinated. Celine's larger point about the oppression of women is valid, but she is not always fair in the specific terms of her argument.

Their mutual laughter isn't quite as enthusiastic as it was a few moments ago. Celine restores harmony by switching topics again to something we, the audience, have probably been thinking since this scene began: how familiar their walking conversation feels. She touches Jesse's arm fondly. Isolated from Ella, Nina, Hank, their host and fellow guests, they are free to discuss things other than pressing, practical matters. And apparently it's been a long time since they were able to do so. "Wandering around bullshitting" is how Jesse affectionately describes their activity. "Nowhere we had to be," Celine adds to his description. "Do you hear what I hear?" Nothing. No quarreling, complaining, needy children. As in Vienna and Paris years ago, the only other people Celine and Jesse encounter on this little trek are of little consequence to them. They have re-occupied a magical world of their own.

Off and on Jesse and Celine hold hands during this scene. They do so briefly, perhaps not even consciously, as they walk through scattered ruins that for them echo distant memories of Vienna, Paris and the Luxembourg Gardens. Luxembourg Gardens? We missed that episode sometime during the past nine years. It's easy to forget that Vienna and Paris are not the sum total of their shared history. Their childhoods, Jesse's former marriage and Celine's ex-boyfriends between 1994 and 2003 are among the gaps in our knowledge about them.

As in the first two films, and previously in this one, the tone of any conversation between Jesse and Celine can turn on a dime. Jesse fondly recalls beating Celine at ping-pong at the Luxembourg Gardens. "Congratulations. You beat a woman pregnant with twins" she responds with less nostalgia. Jesse, as he did on several occasions during dinner after she made an

aggressive remark, replies with a defensive, smartass comment that mocks her implied criticism. “It’s better than *losing* to a pregnant woman with twins.” Celine is not equally amused. But the mood between them remains relatively civil. This scene is still a pleasant throwback to their most harmonious moments in Vienna and Paris. It’s just that certain themes keep cropping up in their dialogs which sometimes lead to trouble. Celine’s resentment of Jesse’s competitiveness is one of them.

Three tourists appear briefly in the distance. Unlike our couple they seem more interested in the ruins than in each other. Jesse and Celine are oblivious to the larger history around them, as they almost always were in Paris and occasionally were in Vienna.

Jesse opens a new avenue of “bullshit” for them to explore: the period of freedom between leaving your parents’ house and having children of your own. “When your life is completely your own” he adds in a voice full of nostalgia. In Jesse’s case that ten-year span of freedom includes the night he spent with Celine in Vienna—a magical evening which, however, led to where they are now, in a troubled relationship, burdened with the responsibilities of parenthood.

Celine concurs, noting how for the past seven years she has measured time by events in the lives of her daughters instead of events in her own life. This little walk through a fragment of ancient Greece is for her and Jesse a reminder of that long-lost, lamented freedom, when no parents told them what to do and no children demanded their attention. They yearn for a past that no longer exists, except on rare, limited occasions like this one.

Despite the current absence of their parents and children, Celine and Jesse must answer to *each other*, of whom they are *not* free. Celine is mildly surprised to hear that Jesse too now measures time by events in the lives of Ella and Nina. Her skepticism implicitly questions his emotional

commitment to the twins. She openly challenges Jesse's claim by testing his memory of specific events in the lives of the twins. Jesse's sour reaction suggests he's faced this particular inquisition before, and doesn't enjoy it. But instead of reacting with a defensive wisecrack that could make matters worse, he answers her challenge directly. In August of 2009, he recalls in detail, they were on vacation with Celine's parents when both children contracted chickenpox. He spreads his arms in triumph. Celine grudgingly concedes, then abruptly changes the subject. Does she do so to diminish Jesse's victory? Initially her new topic seems to signal a little surge of affection for him-, even an indirect acknowledgement of his competence as a parent. Then she touches his arm, inquires "Can I ask you a question?" and stops their walk. Such stoppages in Vienna and Paris often signaled serious exchanges of information or viewpoints.

"If we were meeting for the first time today on a train, would you find me attractive?" Celine cocks her head flirtatiously. Yes, she *is* still attractive. But Jesse's positive response, "Of course," is delivered with less weight than her original question. It sounds hollow, and Celine doesn't buy it. She requests clarification. "No, but really, right now, as I am? Would you start talking to me? Would you ask me to get off the train with you?" Casting aside seven years of shared parenthood, two years of getting reacquainted and an additional nine years of unintended separation, Celine reaches all the way back to the beginning of their relationship, when both were "free," to test the depth of his love for her. But by adding the provision that he's meeting Celine as she appears *now*, not as she appeared in Vienna, she alters the nature of her question. After previously accusing Jesse of ogling other, younger women, she wants to know if he is still physically attracted to her. Would he still take that impulsive, romantic leap with her? Despite Celine's playful manner, it's a serious question, soliciting either a reaffirmation of their love

or an admission that it's passed its expiration date.

The camera scrutinizes Celine's face as she scrutinizes Jesse's for the truth. They both laugh at the awkwardness of the moment. Then Jesse *avoids* answering her question, erecting a number of pointless and absurd complications between it and the direct answer Celine wants. He's being literary and intellectual at the worst moment. Just as, on a couple of occasions late in *Before Sunrise*, first one and then the other character missed opportunities to openly admit their desire to see each other again.

The most absurd part of Jesse's reply to Celine's big question is his characterization of "Yes," the romantic answer she wanted, as an act of infidelity, based on a tortured and bogus reading of her hypothetical. If Celine was largely to blame for intruding their private gripes into a dinner conversation with friends, Jesse now fails miserably to accept her invitation to repair the damage. He treats her question like the plot line in one of his novels instead of the personal and passionate overture it is.

Resuming her walk, thereby signaling the withdrawal of her brief offer of greater intimacy, Celine voices her disappointment in plain terms. "I wanted you to say something romantic, and you blew it." Jesse splutters and stutters as he vainly tries to recover a tactical advantage. Failing that, he conveniently re-defines Celine's romantic overture as a simple expression of lust, grabbing her breasts from behind and telling her he would behave, in the hypothetical situation she posed, like a horny goat. She is amused, maybe even flattered, but will not be outmaneuvered. "The truth is you failed the test" she reiterates. And she adds, challenging him again, that he would also have failed his re-defined, purely sexual version of her test. On that train to Vienna, she insists, Jesse would have ignored "a fat-assed, middle-aged mom losing her

hair.” Jesse laughs at the hair bit. It’s a fact of life that we all change shape as we get older.

Celine has broader hips than she did in Vienna or Paris. But Jesse doesn’t agree with Celine’s negative description of herself.

At least these two old warhorses can still laugh at themselves from time to time, which lightens the mood just enough for Jesse to attempt a moral victory in the face of a romantic defeat. “You set me up to fail!” he protests. Celine concedes some truth to his claim. And though he couches it in a sports analogy that Celine is unlikely to appreciate, Jesse further points out that when it really, not hypothetically, counted, he stepped up and talked to her. Yes, he did. Though perhaps he forgets that she returned the favor after Jesse’s initial foray into conversation fizzled out. Referring to her now as “Baldy,” he mocks Celine’s unflattering description of herself. That’s usually something only experienced couples are allowed to do with each other.

“It was the best thing I ever did” adds Jesse, referring again to initiating a conversation with Celine on board the train to Vienna. Is he being honest, or merely trying to flatter himself out of a tight spot? If he’s sincere, it may be too late. Celine’s attention is distracted by a small family of goats passing nearby. All of them are tethered, definitely not “free” in the sense that Jesse and Celine were free after leaving their parents’ custody and before they had children.

Still fighting the Battle of the Big Question, despite having decisively lost, Jesse questions the validity of Celine’s original inquiry and replaces it with one of his own. Would Celine have gotten off the train with *him* in their hypothetical replay of the past? “No, of course not” she replies, obviously retaliating for Jesse’s inadequate answer to her original question. Jesse tries to use her retaliatory answer to cancel out the blame for his. That’s not fair, because Celine’s question, unlike his, was sincere. She wanted him to reply with romantic passion. When he failed

to do so, the opportunity for an intimate moment between them quickly passed. His subsequent maneuvers to claim victory are a waste of effort. Bad timing can destroy anything. Like the funeral for Celine's grandmother occurring on the same day she was supposed to reunite with Jesse in Vienna.

Rubbing Jesse's nose in defeat, Celine expands on her rejection of Jesse's revised version of her original question. Reacting to the idea of being asked off a train by a horny, forty-one year old Jesse, she declares "How creepy!" That too is unfair, because she previously asked Jesse for a romantic commitment to *her* middle-aged self. Imagine if he had described her current self as "flabby and gross?" Nevertheless, they are smiling. Tensions lurking beneath this conversation haven't yet erupted to the surface. They can still occasionally air their differences in a prevailing spirit of fun.

Jesse takes Celine's unflattering comment about his age in a different direction. "I can't believe I'm forty-one" he remarks with a trace of despondency. Celine continues to joke about it, keeping the mood light but also not addressing what may be his genuine worry about getting older, just as he failed to reassure her that her physical charms had not faded. "You're the oldest guy I ever slept with" she adds. Ouch.

Sliding away from Celine a little, Jesse retaliates in kind. "I know I'm not the oldest guy you've ever blown." Now *that's* an escalation, from playful banter to open attack. He accuses Celine of having an affair with former Polish leader Lech Walesa. She is shocked and appalled. He tries to back away from his reckless remark by admitting the affair occurred before she and Jesse became a couple, taking away the sting of infidelity. It doesn't help. Besides, Celine needs no forgiveness from Jesse because she insists his accusation is untrue. But she has a different,

better kind of ammunition with which to fire back. The East Bloc leader she met was Mikhail Gorbachev of the former Soviet Union, not Walesa. "You geographically-challenged, football-obsessed, donut-loving American" throws everything but the kitchen sink into her culture-based assault. How quickly they've always resorted to such differences when trying to wound each other. Sometimes it's cute and mutually endearing, sometimes petty and vicious. In both cases it's employed because it exists. It's a fact in their lives, like a boorish uncle or a nagging mother-in-law. Celine's alleged weakness for Communism and Jesse's environmental insensitivity too have been fuel for their arguments for eighteen years.

Having overplayed his weak hand, Jesse reluctantly agrees to withdraw his cruel accusation. Yet he cannot resist one last jab. Was it Vaclav Havel, the writer and former Czech leader, with whom she had oral sex? Celine is no longer laughing. But neither is she furious. She's just tired of this particular thread of conversation. The backtracking camera gives us a close-up of their legs and feet, walking side by side as we've seen on many previous occasions, but this time not indicative of a harmonious relationship.

A change in direction and they're now walking through a village. Jesse introduces a new topic into their dialog, though the old one dies hard. He has a "secret" to tell Celine. When he said the same thing in *Before Sunrise*, it was just an excuse to kiss her. Not this time. Still trading sarcastic punches from their previous battle, Celine speculates hopefully that his secret is a fatal brain tumor. She has no way of anticipating that her insult is ill-chosen and badly timed. Jesse announces he has just received news that his grandmother died. That's the news he received via a cell phone text while watching his girls swim in the sea before dinner. One would like to think he isn't mentioning it now just to make Celine feel guilty about her latest attack.

Placing a sympathetic hand on Jesse's shoulder, Celine commiserates with his loss. He downplays it by pointing out his grandmother's advanced age. Celine notes the woman died soon after her husband's death. Was the emotional interdependence between them so strong that the death of one robbed the other of the will to live? Jesse confirms as much by commenting how much his once saintly grandmother changed for the worse after losing her husband. Contrast that romantic relationship with the example of Natalia surviving the loss of *her* beloved husband by many years, and eventually opening herself to a new relationship with Patrick. Perhaps the latter is more a partnership of convenience, a means to ward off loneliness.

Celine inquires how long Jesse's grandparents were married. Seventy-four years. "Fuck!" she reacts with astonishment. "How is that even possible?!" she adds, humorously implying such a lengthy relationship between Jesse and herself is unthinkable. From what we've seen and heard in the movie thus far, it does seem unlikely. Jesse laughs in agreement. And yet at this moment of darkly-comic harmony, with all of their prior and future disagreements momentarily upstaged by the inevitability of death and loss, they seem so damn *close* and so beautifully matched. It's moments like these that counterbalance the predominance of *unromantic* relations in *Before Midnight*.

Mortality and grandmothers are themes that connects all three films of the trilogy. In *Before Sunrise* Jesse recalled a nostalgic garden-hose spray vision he had as a child of his dead grandmother. That disclosure endeared him to Celine, by her own admission contributing to her decision to get off the train with him in Vienna. The death of Celine's grandmother, revealed in *Before Sunset*, prevented the reunion between Jesse and Celine in Vienna. And now the death of Jesse's *other* grandmother, who had grown so old and crotchety that she was no longer the

beloved figure to him that she had been, plays a role in the continuing relations between our couple.

As Jesse and Celine discuss the prospect of being together for many decades to come, they walk past a stone archway with a door consisting of two black panels, each panel decorated with an identical yet separate etched figure. It's a fitting metaphor for shared yet individual lives: one arch, one door, two panels, two etched figures.

Celine comes up with a new question for them to ponder. How old will they be if they stay together as long as Jesse's grandparents did? The figure is ninety-eight. Huddling together, they groan at the prospect. And yet, if only for this moment, they seem quite capable of such romantic longevity. Celine asks Jesse if he could tolerate her for another fifty-six years. But unlike her earlier question, about whether or not he would still engage her in conversation if they met again as strangers on a train, this one is not a trap. She answers her own question before he does, humorously doubting her ability to put up with *him* for that long.

Jesse ponders aloud the many cultural changes his grandparents experienced together. He adds that his grandfather was valedictorian and his grandmother salutatorian of their class. Celine has to ask what that means. Cultural ignorance can work both ways. Jesse defines the terms, without insulting her. But Celine immediately uses his explanation to re-introduce the gender gap into their dialog, speculating that his grandmother deliberately underplayed her own intelligence in order to stroke her husband's delicate male ego. Falling back into *his* tired old routine, Jesse plays the chauvenistic dolt she frequently accuses him of being. "If she wanted to get laid, she better have."

"Obviously, like you know who," Celine retorts. To whom does she refer: herself with the

mysterious East Bloc leader with whom Jesse accused her of having oral sex, or one of Jesse's young, silly, female fans about whom we will hear later in the movie? If the latter, Jesse acts quickly to divert their attention back to the topic of his grandmother's death, which gives him an emotional advantage over Celine. But not necessarily over his father, who telephoned him with the sad news. Upon hearing about his grandmother's death, Jesse told his father "Hey Dad, you're an orphan now," which his father did not find amusing. Neither does Celine, who thinks it was stupid and callous. Was Jesse's cruelty, however unwitting, fueled by a long-standing resentment of his father, who according to Jesse's mother, as revealed in *Before Sunrise*, did not want him to be born in the first place? Every moment, every piece of dialog is shaped, to some extent, by events from the past.

"He's next, then you," remarks Celine, pelting Jesse with something she was toying with in her hand. It's her mild way of rebuking him for his insensitive comment to his grieving father. But is her remark any less cruel than "You're an orphan now"? Jesse tells Celine about his grandparents refusing to have a traditional funeral and wishing to have their ashes intermingled. How romantic. But we all have different ideas of what qualifies as a romantic death. Celine, for example, likes the idea of a clean-shaven, neatly-dressed Jesse attending *her* funeral while holding their daughters' hands. That image reassures Celine that he cares enough about her and their girls to make a little sacrifice for them, which in her mind he failed to do when he didn't reassure her that he would still ask her to get off the train with him in Vienna.

Jesse wriggles out of Celine's funeral fantasy by insisting she will outlive him (my father said the same thing to my mother, who died ten years before he did). "We'll see" she responds, then changes it to "I guess *one* of us will see," touching on the reality that one of them will

eventually have to face. At some point in the future it won't be just a hypothetical for them to play with. Jesse chuckles at her sobering comment. But if we think he's being his usual, emotionally detached self, his next question suggests otherwise. He asks if Celine wants to go with him to the funeral. "To *Texas*?" she replies, unmistakably signaling her distaste for the idea. We and Jesse already know how she feels about America in general and Texas in particular. "It's not going to be in *Paris*" Jesse retorts, as if to remind her there is a world outside the City of Light, the country of France and the continent of Europe.

Instead of just admitting her reluctance to go to America in support of Jesse, Celine offers a less obviously selfish and rather unconvincing excuse. The trip will be expensive. It's just like Jesse, earlier, avoiding a direct answer to Celine's romantic query by inserting irrelevant, hypothetical complications into her equation. I get the strong impression that Jesse's question is as emotionally important to him as Celine's was to her. It was probably more a *request* than an inquiry. Celine should remember the profound impact her own beloved grandmother's death had on her eighteen years ago, of which we got a hint nine years later. Instead she fails Jesse, just as he failed her a few minutes ago. Shaking his head sardonically, Jesse recognizes Celine's evasive tactics for what they are, and the contempt for his home country that motivates them. To avoid further unpleasantness he falsely claims it would be "simpler if I go alone." He's lying to both Celine and himself.

The barking of a dog provides welcome distraction from an emotionally awkward moment for our couple, who are holding hands despite their emotional differences. Maybe on some non-verbal, unconscious level the death of a family member draws them closer. But on a verbal level Celine returns to the troublesome topic that divides them, and in the worst way. Jesse calling his

father an orphan to the man's face, for which Celine rebuked him, is mild compared to her comment that without her tagging along to cramp his style Jesse is free to fuck his cousins. "Isn't that common where you come from?" Wow! That's a cultural stereotype of the most egregious kind, and besides that misapplied to the state of Texas. Jesse laughs it off. Maybe that's the reaction Celine intended, hoping to joke Jesse out of his pain. They certainly know each other well enough to say things that would be highly inappropriate coming from a stranger or even a casual friend. Or maybe Celine's joke was an unwitting attempt to push away the guilt she feels about not accompanying Jesse to the funeral. Regardless of her motivation, it probably adds to the growing undercurrent of hostility between them.

Reverting back to a previous topic of discussion, but with the realities of death and separation obviously still on her mind, Celine asks if Jesse will be able to put up with her for another fifty-six years. This time he gets it right. "I am looking forward to it." Celine acknowledges his success. But then, perhaps in retaliation for her declining his invitation to accompany him to his grandmother's funeral and for her lame joke about Texas, he deliberately lives down to the low opinion of him she expressed at dinner. He claims his real interest in taking her with him to America is simple lust. Apparently taking no offense, Celine is amused. "My hairy Spanish lover is back." He corrects her by changing his nationality to Greek, as though he must get in the last word. Yet the same topic that earlier triggered such a battle between them now serves as pleasant, diversionary banter. The tone of their conversations depends as much or more on their moods than on the topics they discuss. When they're feeling surly, *any* topic can explode into an argument. When they're not, they can transform their differences and pet peeves into relatively harmless, though revealing, wordplay. And that duality has been evident since their first

conversation in *Before Sunrise*.

Celine changes topics again, noting the similarity of the village through which they're walking to a setting in a 1950's movie she saw as a teenager. She describes a scene from that film depicting a couple walking through the ruins of Pompei, looking at bodies frozen in the positions they occupied when overtaken by ash from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. For Celine that movie memory is linked to the experience of being held by Jesse as they sleep, with their daughters lying nearby. So her new topic, generally speaking, is still *death*: albeit a very romantic kind of death in which Celine, Jesse and their children are frozen, or melted, into an eternal state of harmony. This is reminiscent of her fascination with the teenage girl whose grave she visited, once without and a second time with Jesse, in the Cemetery of the No Names. The suicidal Elizabeth, she once remarked, will always remain a teenager even as Celine grows old. On a fantasy level Celine wants to perpetuate an idyllic state of family harmony with Jesse and their daughters, perhaps because she's haunted by the impossibility of sustaining such a blissful state of existence.

Jesse listens to Celine's story with interest, but cannot resist pointing out its morbidity. That's what he and Celine do, at their best. Talk about private matters, listen to each other, and sometimes gently kid each other. She acknowledges the creepiness of her analogy, yet insists the idea of dying with the person she loves is romantic. Plugging into Celine's romantic fantasy, Jesse asks if she wants to die with *him*. Is this another of those big questions--an indirect way of verifying that Celine still loves him? She equivocates. "Maybe" sounds hopeful, until she awkwardly amends it with "if we were, you know, our first night together, then, a long time ago." Ah, yes, when their love was fresh and full of potential rather than worn out and stale. "But

now, *no!* I'd like to *live!*" That kills it. Jesse compares her unromantic answer to his own failure to respond correctly to her big question earlier. That he brings up her question suggests it still bothers him.

Celine makes a small concession. If they both reach the age of ninety-eight, she might answer differently. But not any time sooner. Jesse gives her a look. She shrugs and apologizes. He looks away with a slight smirk. They've both failed each other recently, but it's difficult to say how seriously they regard their present conversation. Jesse is easily distracted from it, verbally acknowledging a passing stranger.

Turning away from matters of love and death, Jesse directs Celine's attention to a small, thousand year old Byzantine chapel along their path. He reminds her that he had told her about it earlier. They still share some of their separate interests with each other, which is a good sign. In Vienna they paused to rest inside a cathedral of more interest to Celine than to Jesse. Now it's Jesse who exhibits a greater interest in religion, describing the chapel's interior and purpose to Celine.

Drawings on the wall, faded and chipped with age, remind Jesse of art made by Japanese monks using materials designed to disappear quickly. Both reflect Jesse's fascination with impermanence, as does the character from his proposed fourth book who sees everything as transitory. Eighteen years ago Celine displayed a similar interest as expressed in the art of Seurat. The illusion of permanence in human shapes preserved by volcanic ash falling on Pompeii is her present-day reaction to that oppressive sense of impermanence. It's remarkable the variety of private thoughts and feelings these two characters can share with each other when they're receptive rather than defensive.

Jesse spoke with the chapel's caretaker when he visited earlier, just as Celine did at the Cemetery of the No Names during her first visit to Vienna. She inquires about the gouged-out eyes in the wall paintings. Vandalized by Turkish invaders, Jesse explains. Celine jokes, "I'm never eating Turkish food again." Jesse mocks her joke instead of treating it as sympathetic. Does he resent her flippant attitude about what is for him a special place? Did Celine even *intend* her remark to be flippant? Whether she did or not, she resents Jesse's reaction enough to fire back in a decidedly unsympathetic manner. "Okay fine, I'll never suck another Turkish cock" refers sardonically to Jesse's earlier accusation about Celine's loose sexual habits, which she did not find amusing. He laughs and mocks her again. In the blink of an eye their congenial dialog backslides into barely concealed hostility. Both characters are, emotionally, much more thin-skinned with each other than they used to be.

Jesse's sarcasm adds fuel to the fire, so Celine intensifies her attack, offering a phony apology for making blow job jokes in front of a "closet Christian." He could have accused her of the same back in Vienna. They're smiling, but the verbal jabs are real. Trying to discredit her latest accusation, Jesse claims, "We've done worse." Did they have sex in a church sometime during these past nine years? But while hinting at it, he speaks quietly and shushes her, suggesting he *is* offended by her behavior in this church. Sensing as much, she pours it on, making the sign of the cross in phony penitence, then licking her folded, praying hands as though they were a penis. Wicked stuff, intended more to aggravate her companion than to insult religion in general. It's also something of a reversal of what happened in the cathedral in Vienna when, after Celine expressed attraction to the place, Jesse told a story about his atheist friend and a homeless man that questioned the sincerity of faith itself. But in Vienna there was less accumulated resentment

being funneled into their humorous banter. Now they have much more material with which to browbeat each other, and many more reasons to do so.

Unwittingly and ironically, Celine changes the topic to something that takes religion, or at least tradition, more seriously. She tells Jesse their daughters keep asking her what their wedding was like. Pictures of religious icons are visible behind them. Obviously Celine lied to the girls about being married, as both she and Jesse did in the car about the “missing” apple and the “closed” ruins. She told the girls their wedding was “low key.” Jesse’s reply makes it clear to us they were never married. Celine describes the non-event as “Quaker,” referring back to the cathedral in Vienna, where Jesse described the culmination of a Quaker wedding and then the two of them briefly acted it out. That, apparently, was their only wedding.

Accepting a hug from Jesse, Celine turns away while telling him, “They want us to be married so badly. It’s important to them.” The expression on her face suggests she is speaking for herself as much as for the girls. Jesse casually inquires if she wants to get married in this chapel. Surpassing his casual tone with a flippancy, she answers “No.” Is this another of those big occasions when one character fails the other by not comprehending the seriousness of the moment? Describing their daughters’ fondness for fairy tales, Celine seems to take pleasure in such fantasies herself. Even silly, illogical, cartoon fairy tales, as she dismissively, defensively describes them. Jesse nuzzles her affectionately, but with little indication he appreciates the seriousness of her remarks. Celine quickly deserts his embrace and walks out of the camera frame, followed by Jesse, leaving the religious icons behind.

Their journey continues in a more modern Greek setting. As they descend a long flight of steps, Celine picks up a thread of the conversation they dropped when they entered the chapel:

the prospect of spending another fifty-six years together. If they did so, she wonders what Jesse would want to change about her? There is no indication in her manner that she recalls asking him the same question in Vienna, as they walked along the Danube late at night. Or that on that occasion it almost led to the end of their acquaintance. Jesse, whether or not *he* remembers the Vienna episode, replies the same way he did eighteen years ago, refusing to answer such a dangerously loaded question. Instead he cleverly turns it inside out. What he would most like to change about Celine is to make her stop trying to change *him*, which is a more effective response than what he gave eighteen years earlier, when he simply reversed the question and opened the door for Celine to critique him.

Their conversation jogs sideways, into the question of how well they know each other and themselves. Jesse claims to know Celine better than anyone else on the planet, but hedges by adding "Maybe that's not saying much." Celine does the same, feeling close to Jesse at *this* moment but estranged from him at others. By phrasing it as "You're breathing helium and I'm breathing oxygen" Celine casts Jesse as the alien. He plays along with her criticism, as he often does when feeling attacked, by pretending to talk in a helium-induced falsetto voice. Celine feels vindicated, insisting she wanted to "truly connect" and blaming him for making a joke instead. But the emotional consequences of their contrary perspectives here are minimal, because their overall mood is lighthearted. They're not fully invested in the verbal barbs they toss at one another. Jesse offers Celine a truce of sorts by suggesting that if they want to get to know each other better they'll first have to know themselves better. Maybe that's just a clever evasion, but Celine seems satisfied with it.

By way of illustrating Jesse's point, Celine tells the brief story of an old friend from New York

who upon learning that he was terminally ill finally felt stress-free, able to enjoy life without worrying about trivial matters. Jesse, the writer, expecting a plot twist to make the story more interesting, asks if the guy is still alive. Does he want something more ironic, as in the dying man sells all his property, spends all his money and then discovers he's *not* dying? Puzzled, Celine tells him her friend died long ago. The topic fizzles out. Jesse missed her point, and she missed the point of his question. They simply did not connect with each other this time.

It's Jesse's turn to tell a story, recollecting a dream he had last night. He dreamt of reading a book he describes as a "lost classic," though admits it doesn't exist outside his dream. Entitled "The Rovers," it's a story about young people wandering around. He further describes it as "great, fresh, experimental," with much "energy." In his typically indirect manner he's describing his own youth, perhaps even his amazing first encounter with Celine, when as 20-somethings they spent an evening exploring Vienna and each other. It's a nostalgic dream of better times, with all the unpleasant parts edited out, kind of like Celine's Pompeian vision of perpetual family harmony.

Celine makes fun of the fact that in his dream Jesse is reading a book. Her dreams, by contrast, are action-oriented superhero affairs in which she breaks through impossible barriers and ends up having an orgasm, overcoming the obstacles she seldom does as an environmental activist. Superficially their dreams are very different, yet both involve wish-fulfillment in the face of a frustrating reality.

The camera switches to a rear view of the characters and then stops. Jesse and Celine walk away, reminding *us* of the transitory nature of human life. "I'm going to try to make your dreams come true" he tells her, referring to the orgasmic climax of her dream. He's back to *that* again.

But she enjoys it this time. She did not during the dinner scene, when she accused him of being obsessed with sex. These two aging, battle-scarred warriors of love hold hands as they recede into the distance, framed against a beautiful dusk backdrop of ocean, boats, mountain and yellow sky. They are visually bracketed by two sets of street pylons and two fat palm trees: one non- and one semi-romantic metaphor. Beyond Celine and Jesse another couple sits on a bench overlooking the same scenery at which we and our couple gaze. The return of mellow piano music evokes, in my mind, nostalgic memories of Vienna and Paris as we watch Celine and Jesse recapture an old mood. It's as romantic an image of enduring love as I've seen in any film. For one brief moment, with no hyperbolic dialog to spoil it, Celine's and Jesse's individual dreams come true simultaneously. We, the audience, want them to succeed from this point forward. Many movie romances would end with the conclusion of this wonderful scene, or maybe the next one. But after earlier rumblings of trouble between these characters, Jesse and Celine must endure their private version of Walpurgisnacht before there's any hope of them lasting another fifty-six years together.

Before descending into the pits of Hell, Celine and Jesse enjoy an extension of the serenity depicted at the end of the previous scene. Seated at a table for two at the end of a pier, surrounded by other people yet secluded in a world of their own, they watch the sun set over distant mountains and a shimmering sea. Think back to their café tables in Vienna and Paris.

Music transposes the wistful, affectionate mood from the end of the previous scene into this one. Celine and Jesse watch the sun disappear. She marks its passage: "Still there. Still there." Relaxed, they glance at each other fondly. "Still there" Celine repeats, and repeats again, in a hushed tone. This feels like a private ritual between the two of them. Have they performed it

many times over the years? Maybe it's a little thing that brings them closer together, reaffirming that private space they've managed to bridge, to paraphrase Celine from eighteen years ago.

Finally the sun dips out of sight and Celine pronounces it "gone." The lighting grows dimmer. She and Jesse exchange another silent look, then avert their heads with a trace of sadness. Is this just another transitory moment in their lives or do they both sense the end of something bigger? Is this the final sunset they will share? Is the setting sun a metaphor for their fading love? Celine sips from her drink. Jesse rubs his mouth. Neither says another word. Maybe they're remembering Vienna eighteen years ago, Paris nine years ago, or a place and time we never shared with them. Maybe they're not even thinking the same thing. The end of this short scene is played so subtly and ambivalently that it's difficult to interpret. These two characters, who have lived and loved and fought together for so many years, understand things about each other that we can't.

Our couple enters the hotel where Ariadne and Stefanos have generously booked them a room for the night. Because the desk clerk speaks little English, Celine has to explain to Jesse why the man needs his credit card. Although it's of little significance on this occasion, Jesse again plays the "dumb American" to Celine's more cosmopolitan European. It's a role he's had to play ever since committing to Celine.

A second, female desk clerk joins her colleague. Like Celine, she's blonde, but younger. And she carries copies of Jesse's first two books, informing the author that she and her husband are big fans. Her husband gave her the first book on their first date. They read the second book out loud to one another. It's a nice story, neither silly nor bimbo-like in the manner parodied by Celine at dinner. The clerk asks Jesse to autograph her copies, and he politely obliges. They

engage in a brief, friendly discussion about cultural differences. Each accommodating the other's native culture, he compliments the artwork on the cover of the Greek edition while she questions the Greek translation of his titles. Are they flirting? If so, it's very mild. Obviously the clerk is a little star-struck.

The same clerk asks Celine, as Jesse's model for the heroine of both novels, to autograph the books as well. Celine balks, claiming not to be the character Jesse's "big imagination" conjured up. Clearly she resents Jesse's fame and especially his public account of the beginning of their private relationship. It's a sore spot for her that we can trace back to Paris. Her resentment is perhaps born of several factors: Jesse's success as a novelist outshines her struggle as an environmental activist; Jesse's version of their relationship in Vienna and Paris exists in a public form while hers remains unknown; Celine's responsibilities as a working mother consumes so much of her time and energy that she has no time to pursue *her* creative outlets.

The prospect of another public airing of their private differences looms ominously, but only for a moment. Interrupting and countermanding Celine's refusal to sign books she did not write, Jesse's insists "She'd be happy to" while sliding them in her direction. Yielding, but not happy about it, Celine repeats and mocks his words while autographing the books. Her grin and squint when thanked by the desk clerk is the equivalent of gritting her teeth in irritation. But the awkwardness passes quickly, with no acknowledgement of it as Jesse and Celine enter their hotel room. Both are impressed with their accommodations.

Air conditioning, a bathtub, a bottle of wine and a couple's massage add up to a nice package, all courtesy of their friends. Celine is now grateful for their gift, and wants to reciprocate. Gone for the moment are her earlier reservations about the room. But when she and Jesse enter

the bedroom, her attitude changes. Parting the curtains and gazing out the window, Celine tells Jesse she misses Ella and Nina. "I don't," he responds while embracing and nuzzling her from behind. He's doing exactly what he promised her at the conclusion of their romantic stroll a short time ago, when she found the prospect of sex agreeable.

Though her thoughts may be elsewhere, Celine puts up no resistance when Jesse leads her to the bed, bares her breasts and begins foreplay. On the contrary, she joins in the fun, but with a slight word of discouragement when she notes the absence of red in Jesse's beard—a feature she's claimed on more than one occasion in the past eighteen years is one of the things that originally attracted her to him. Is the red beard symptomatic of *many* things she misses about Vienna-era Jesse?

Nibbling on Celine's nipples, Jesse dismisses her interest in his hair color. It's straight to the point with him. But she's inclined to linger a bit longer in the past, noting the hint of red in their daughters' eyelashes. "I look at them and it makes me think of when we met." She makes these remarks quietly, in between a kiss she initiates and her affectionate stroking of his hair. She's half in and half out of their lovemaking. Her affection for Jesse has become, at least partly, a thing of recollection (the former red in his beard) and surrogacy (the daughters who inherited some of that red). Some of their early passion has faded away.

Pulling Celine down onto the bed, Jesse follows her lead and reaches back into his own storage room of nostalgic memories, specifically of being in bed with her before their children were born and enjoying morning sex without the annoyance of interruptions. Immediate arousal gradually displaces nostalgia for the past. Celine, now on top, agrees with Jesse, in effect abandoning her yearning for what once was and getting down to the sexy business at hand. "I love you too" Jesse

responds. Music suddenly enters the soundtrack. To enhance their romantic moment? No. The music comes from Celine's cell phone and has the opposite effect. Both characters are annoyed by the disruption. Celine, thinking it might be an emergency call from their daughters, abandons the bed and Jesse to answer the phone in the living room. Jesse does not follow her. There's no argument here yet. But think back to a conversation in Paris when Jesse complained about his then wife neglecting him after the birth of their son, Hank. On that occasion Celine defended the new mother's preoccupation with her child.

It's Hank on the phone, not Ella or Nina. It's déjà vu for Jesse, but with a different "wife" and under different circumstances. He's had nine years to build up a whopping case of guilt over abandoning his son, so for him the annoying interruption of lovemaking quickly becomes something else. Celine, meanwhile, treats Hank no differently than she would her own children. "Hey, sweetie, are you okay?" Jesse, removing his shoes and socks in bed, getting ready for the sex he still anticipates, signals for Celine to hand him the phone. Instead she tells Hank, "Good luck with your Mom" and "I love you too," then hangs up.

The inference that Hank told Celine he loves her and that he misses Ella and Nina, plus Celine's responses in kind, yields the impression of one big, happy, extended family. But it ain't necessarily so. Because the one person *not* mentioned by either Celine or Hank is Jesse, who was already feeling alienated from his son. From his point of view, in the bedroom, we can see a bottle of wine and two glasses on the coffee table in the living room. They take us back to an adventure he and Celine enjoyed in Vienna, when they conned a bar owner out of a bottle of wine, stole two wine glasses and shared an *uninterrupted* evening of lovemaking under the stars. They're not so fortunate this time.

A framed art photograph hanging above the living room couch shows someone leaping across a gap along the top of some ancient ruins. It looks dangerous. I'm reminded of the Gordon Lightfoot song, "Race Among the Ruins." Note also that both characters in this scene are and *appear* to be middle-aged. No attempt has been made with either make-up or costuming to hide that fact. There is wear and tear on those bodies and in those hearts.

Returning to the bedroom, Celine reassures Jesse that Henry is okay and will phone him from Chicago. She undresses further, in preparation for their lovemaking, until she's blindsided by a complaint that she didn't let Jesse talk to Hank before hanging up the phone. The same thing happened in the car on the way to Patrick's house. She has a valid excuse. Henry was about to board another plane in London. But Jesse remains annoyed, looking to pick a fight with her. Hank probably phoned Celine because he feels more comfortable confiding in her than in his father, who like many fathers tends to offer unwanted advice to their teenage children. Celine is like a mother to Hank in some ways, but more a friend and confidante in others. We also get the sense that Hank's real mother is too filled with hate for Jesse to give her son the kindness and understanding he deserves. Jesse resents the boy's preference for Celine. But instead of directing that resentment at Hank, about whom he feels so much parental guilt, he deflects it onto Celine.

Arousal and resentment contend for dominance, just as arousal and nostalgia did earlier. As soon as Celine returns to the bed, Jesse resumes fondling her breasts, as though sex were still imminent. At the same time he nags her about her phone conversation with Hank. Something's got to give.

Displaying fatherly concern, Jesse inquires what it was that Hank forgot, as the phone conversation hinted. But Celine already has that little problem solved. She will mail to Henry

the science project he mistakenly left behind. So again Jesse's input is not needed. Instead of expressing directly his resentment of Celine usurping his parental role, he instead targets her criticism of his former wife over the phone. Celine merely told Hank "Good luck with your Mom," but it provides Jesse with an opening to retaliate for something unrelated. Celine tries to brush it off as trivial. But Jesse insists she was out of line, which is his way of telling her to butt out of the affairs of his *other* family, and reminding her that she is not Hank's mother. He should be grateful that Celine treats Hank like a son and has earned the boy's trust. But even *that* fact is complicated, since at dinner she voiced resentment of Jesse's alleged plan to move their family to Chicago, where she would have to play full-time babysitter to his son.

The film's climactic argument has begun. Celine no longer tries to minimize it. She accuses Jesse of avoiding the obvious by pretending there is no problem between Henry (the name she prefers to Jesse's "Hank") and his mother. And she does so in the terms of a culture clash that has always been an incendiary, though occasionally sexy, issue between them. She insists that Jesse's avoidance of reality is typically American. Obviously she and Henry have previously discussed the problem of his mother, and probably at the boy's request. She tries to mollify Jesse by telling him she once joked with Henry about mud wrestling with the boy's mother in order to settle their differences. And she uses a *sports* analogy! She's appealing to Jesse's sense of humor, but it doesn't work.

Jesse insists that by criticizing Hank's mother Celine makes the boy feel bad about *himself*. She cannot win this debate because what really annoys Jesse is that she is more of a parental confidante to the boy than is he. Yet she persists in trying, insisting that Henry is old enough to deal with the hostility between herself and his mother.

Jesse, who has already stopped caressing Celine, abandons their bed for the living room. We watch him walk away from her while framed by the open, sliding doors between the rooms. Figuratively speaking, the doors of communication are rapidly closing. Only *one* wine glass is now visible on the coffee table. "His mother and *me*" Jesse snaps back, correcting Celine's English. It's a cheap shot, considering that Celine is willing to conduct this argument in *his* native language. It's also retaliation, whether consciously so or not, for her earlier insult about his typically American avoidance of reality.

A moment ago Celine defended her mud wrestling joke by insisting it was aimed as much at herself as at Hank's mother. Now, riled by Jesse's unnecessary linguistic insult, she places *all* blame squarely on her rival, then slyly transfers it to Jesse himself, for committing the infidelity for which the former Mrs. Wallace now resents Celine. "Yeah, right" Jesse replies facetiously, implying that it was Celine who initiated the sex they enjoyed back at her apartment in Paris, nine years ago. *Before Sunset* ended before their lovemaking began, but from what we saw it appeared they both had a hand in starting it. Celine danced seductively for Jesse, to a Nina Simone CD he chose to play on her stereo.

In the familiar way of many veteran couples, Jesse takes Celine's phone out of her purse without asking for her permission. And she does not object, any more than he would if she took something out of his billfold. Before he switches off that phone, cutting off any further contact between Celine and Hank in the near future, we see that her screen saver is a nice family portrait of Henry, Jesse, Ella and Nina. They are, presumably, the people dearest to her. But for the moment Jesse doesn't want to share Hank with her, shutting her out in retaliation for what he assumes was her attempt to shut *him* out.

Celine continues to defend her attempts to make Henry feel better about his troubled family situation—a situation she insists turned sour long before she joked with him about mud wrestling with his mom. After taking concrete action (switching off her cell phone) to separate Hank from Celine, Jesse facetiously concedes that she is right about everything, “as usual. Let’s just not talk about it. Okay?” His delivery drips with insincerity. It’s one of his passive-aggressive maneuvers that Celine resents. She refuses to be silenced, bluntly describing Henry’s mother as a psychologically abusive alcoholic. “Don’t say that” Jesse responds, as though her accusation were groundless. Is he really defending his ex-wife? Or does he downplay her faults in order to emphasize Celine’s, because he resents her close relationship with Hank? Back at the airport Hank said his mother *hates* Jesse. In the car Jesse himself insisted his former wife would never consent to a custody transfer of Hank because of that same hatred. Celine is not saying much more than Jesse has not already heard from Hank or admitted to himself. Yet he remains territorial about his American family, expecting Celine to sacrifice for it but denying her the right to participate in or criticize it.

Desperate to defend herself in the face of Jesse defending his ex-wife, Celine escalates her attack, comparing her rival to Medea, a character from Greek mythology who was obsessively jealous of her husband and a danger to her children. But by drawing on literature to make her point, Celine plays to Jesse’s strength. “Actually, a play by Euripides” he dryly informs her, just as he corrected her English a few minutes ago. He can be insufferable at times, and so can she. And he issues his latest insult while washing his face in the bathroom sink. Apparently the prospect of sweaty sex is gone for the evening.

Celine refines her mythological analogy of a woman killing her children in order to punish

their father. "She's making my life hell through him." Jesse corrects her again, splitting hairs in order to snipe at Celine for a different reason. He accuses Celine of saying things to Hank "that just go too far." But all she said to the boy was, "Good luck with your mother," not "Your mother is hurting you in order to punish your dad." That opinion she reserves for Jesse's ears alone.

Celine refuses to accept blame for Jesse's bad relations with his "wife." "Ex-wife," he again corrects her. Technically he's right. But maybe Celine is indirectly expressing resentment of the fact that Jesse never asked *her* to marry him? Remember how bitter she was in *Before Sunset* that several men she had dated after Vienna had gone on to marry other women and told her, thinking it was a compliment, how well she had prepared them for marriage. So many events and emotions from the past form the subtext to the present argument between Celine and Jesse.

Returning to the bedroom, Jesse admits mishandling his separation and divorce years ago. But then he throws it back in Celine's face by accusing her of re-writing history in order to blame him for all their problems in the present. Perhaps he forgets that he *literally* re-wrote his past with Celine by fictionalizing their first encounter, and that his fiction has since become the official, public version of their night in Vienna. As he returns to bed he walks like an old man with tired feet from travelling too many miles. Like the sorry state of his and Celine's aging relationship, now burdened with years of accumulated grievances.

Celine fires back, blaming Jesse for dumping his problems with Henry on her doorstep. Direct from their earlier disagreement in the car comes her resentment of Jesse's alleged plan to move their family to Chicago so he can be a better father to Henry. That plan would make it impossible for her to continue her current job or accept the one recently offered to her. And by opposing it

she feels guilty because that would keep Jesse from spending more time with his son. She gets out of bed and puts the top of her dress back on: *her* signal that sex is off the table. Jesse reaches out to pull her back. She ignores him. He speaks to her in a softer, soothing tone of voice, but his words are not conciliatory. He tells her she has *chosen* to believe he wants to drag her to Chicago. But if he didn't imply as much back in the car, why hasn't he cleared up the misunderstanding? If he really does want to move their family to the States, accusing Celine of putting those words in his mouth is an underhanded way of making her feel bad about refusing.

Hands defiantly on her hips, Celine declares, "It is in the nature of women to be the nurturer." Jesse doesn't understand her pronunciation of "nurturer." She repeats it. He condescendingly clarifies, "The nur-tur-er." Professor Wallace delivers another English lesson. Did he really not understand, or is he deliberately belittling her? In either case, it aggravates the hostility between them.

A new incendiary is tossed into an already volatile brew. Celine accuses Jesse of earlier giving her a "look" blaming her for forgetting to pack Henry's science project in his luggage. We could hardly have seen that one coming, because for as much time as we've spent with these characters we have not attained their level of sensitivity to the subtle, unspoken communications between them. "It's *always* my fault" Celine complains as she exits the bedroom and the camera frame. "Yeah, right" snidely replies Jesse, left alone on the bed.

Returning to the living room couch, Celine switches on the cell phone Jesse previously switched off, reasserting control over her ability to contact Henry, and also her daughters, about whom she expressed concern when she entered the hotel room. Always the nurturer, as she claimed. It's also a gesture of defiance directed at Jesse.

If Jesse occasionally uses his literary background to score points during his arguments with Celine, she can do likewise. She quotes from a refrigerator magnet at her place of work a line about how women always sacrifice themselves for others. It's a pithy quote, which unfortunately makes it a perfect target for Jesse's contempt. "That's a sure sign from God" he responds. Career versus career (novelist and environmental activist), language/culture versus language/culture (English/American and French) and gender versus gender: at present *everything* divides Celine and Jesse. Defending her refusal to sacrifice her needs to those of men, Celine taps into the long history of persecution of women by men, and the feminist reaction against it, to bolster her private gripe against Jesse.

The debate rages back and forth from couch to bed. Exaggerating for effect, Jesse applauds Celine's feminist speech, nominates her for a Nobel Prize and acknowledges her incomparable oppression as a woman. Then with bitter contempt he undermines her qualifications for martyrdom. She, in turn, pretends to play the brainless slave girl she claims Jesse wants to accompany him to Chicago. Gender issues they occasionally discussed with sensitivity and sincerity in Vienna are now reduced to vitriolic cartoon caricatures.

Jesse reaches for a tactical advantage by hypocritically accusing Celine of reducing their dialog to the level of mindless sniping. "Well, *you* started it" she fires back, to which he complains that she won't "shut up about it." They're now bickering children exchanging an infantile barrage of insults. Jesse proposes "an unemotional, rational" conversation about their differences. But his manner of doing so heavily implies that Celine is the principle obstacle to such a dialog, which undercuts the credibility of his proposal. He's just trying to score another debate point against her.

Predictably, Celine reacts to Jesse's suggestion as a thinly disguised insult to "emotional, irrational" women in general. She's right, until she mimics his tactic by lumping Jesse in with so-called "rational," powerful men who start wars, rape the environment and commit other atrocities. Naming Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld among the guilty, Celine not surprisingly selects two *American* males to exemplify her gender villain. The culture war is revived in order to reinforce the gender war. Irrational? Of course. But neither character is being rational at the moment. Building to a climax of hyperbole, Celine adds the Nazis and their Final Solution to her grab bag of male insanity, from which she implies Jesse too has sprung.

Jesse gets out of bed and puts on his pants, as though intending to leave the hotel room. Instead he joins Celine on the couch, where he calmly, rationally refocuses their discussion to the matter of Henry's future welfare. Would Henry, he asks, be better off with Jesse and Celine than with his mother? Celine insists he would, but adds that Hank's mother schemed to remove the boy from New York while Celine struggled, almost fatally, to give birth to Jesse's daughters in Paris. Not much of a feminist bond there. But by introducing the matter of her difficult delivery of the twins, Celine touches on a life-altering experience that Jesse cannot comprehend and has maybe never fully appreciated.

Concurring with Celine's complaint about his ex-wife and pointing out the impossibility of removing Hank from Chicago, Jesse inquires if there is any way Celine would be comfortable moving to Chicago so they could both be with him. So now we come to it. After previously denying that he ever asked Celine to move to Chicago, and accusing her of irrationally *choosing* to believe that he did so, he now tries to maneuver her into agreeing to that very plan by using her "nurturer" argument against her. And he executes this devious maneuver under the guise of

an unemotional, rational discussion. Perhaps Celine read Jesse correctly when she claimed, back in the car, that he would eventually blame her for keeping him away from Henry.

Celine fights back, asking why it's always up to her to make the sacrifices in their relationship. Jesse responds with his customary exasperation at her propensity to be "so dramatic." Back and forth they go, with little indication of common ground. Moving to Chicago *is* dramatic, Celine points out. Jesse insists he's not suggesting they move to Chicago, but only wants to rationally discuss the idea with her. Celine tries to comply.

Starting over, though with these two it's never from scratch, Jesse draws an analogy between Celine feeling guilty about being away from their daughters for one evening to the way he feels about being apart from Hank all the time. Though his point has some validity, his comparison places Celine at a disadvantage. Admitting that he "fucked up," Jesse insists he just wants to re-establish closer ties with his son. But from what we've seen and heard in this film, he's not that connected to his daughters, with whom he has always lived. He's not so much negligent as detached, existing on his literary plane while their lives, and Celine's, play out elsewhere.

Separate, alternating shots of each character emphasizes their mutual isolation. Each is backlit by a different lamp. Nevertheless, Celine tries to match Jesse's rational approach to their ongoing discussion. She calmly explains that Henry no longer needs Jesse the way he did as a child, and that the years Jesse missed being with the boy are simply a fact of life that has to be faced. "You're a great father in other ways" sounds like a sincere compliment. Going way beyond it, she offers to re-consider in a month's time the idea of moving to Chicago, if he still feels the same way about it. But she will do so only on condition that his ex-wife agrees to share custody of Henry. Anything less would not be worth the sacrifice, she contends and Jesse concurs.

During this period of relative calm Jesse reaches out and takes Celine's hand in his.

Reconciliation seems possible, until . . .

Until they unwittingly slide into a discussion about the roots of Jesse's break-up with his former wife, and the impact it had on Henry. Celine has already remarked that all children get dragged through their parents' lives, for better or worse. And that Jesse's divorce had no worse an impact on Henry than a sustained but hateful marriage would have had. Jesse himself said in Vienna that his parents should have divorced long before they did rather than stay together for the sake of their children. The resulting bitterness inspired his mother to tell Jesse that his father never wanted him to be born. But in the present scene, nearly two decades later, Jesse's guilt over abandoning Hank is linked in his mind to the divorce that allowed him to start a new life and family with Celine. He neither says nor perhaps even knowingly implies that Celine shares in that guilt. But she understandably interprets it that way.

Celine removes her hand from Jesse's. She resents any guilt Jesse may be attempting to lay at her feet for the failure of his marriage and the subsequent abandonment of his son. Is she overreacting to an accusation he never made? He reacts as though she were. But then we learn new details of their life together. After reconnecting in Paris, Celine moved to New York with Jesse, giving up her job in the process. That's a sacrifice previously unknown to us. Only in the final stages of a complicated pregnancy did she ask Jesse, and he agreed, to move to Paris so she could be with her mother during the birth of their twin girls. Jesse adamantly denies blaming her for his estrangement from Hank. But she suspects he does anyway.

"Stop it" Jesse quietly pleads, implying that Celine has once again overreacted. He restates his original position that he is merely searching for a way to spend more time with his son "as a

family,” delivering that message in a soothing voice, with hands spread out in a gesture of appeasement. Celine interprets his meaning differently. “As a family or *what?*” she demands to know, leaving the couch and heading for the hotel room exit before turning back to face him. “What the fuck does that mean?” he retaliates, all signs of reconciliation gone now.

Is Celine being too sensitive? Too eager to pick a fight over every little thing Jesse says? Maybe. But we’ve already seen evidence that Jesse resents his son’s emotional ties to Celine, and is capable of criticizing her indirectly for it, such as accusing her of belittling Hank’s mother in front of the boy. And in scenes like this one, in which we discover things about Celine and Jesse’s past nine years together that we didn’t previously know, we are forced to acknowledge our limited perspective and to reserve judgment a little about their arguments. “Either do this [move to Chicago] or I will resent you for the rest of our lives” is how Celine sums up what she believes to be Jesse’s veiled ultimatum.

Working off some of her anger, Celine retrieves water from the bathroom sink with which to make tea. This will *not* be a repeat of the tea shared by these characters in Celine’s apartment in Paris. Returning to the living room, she broadens her assault on Jesse by accusing him of resenting any career achievement by her that might threaten his status within their relationship. We’re back to the gender gap. Celine’s frustrating experience of dealing, often unsuccessfully, with so many powerful men of the world plays a role in her anger towards Jesse. Is he being made to bear the guilt of all males motivated by greed, aggression and competition? Or has she previously experienced subtle power struggles with Jesse within the confines of their private relationship? It’s obvious from the scene in the hotel lobby that she resents, maybe envies, his literary success, which was originally based on what she sees as his appropriation, distortion and

exploitation of their romantic night in Vienna. Combined with her recent failure to get a piece of environmental legislation approved, it might be enough to set her off.

Jesse downplays the prestige of his current job—teaching two college courses a semester at a university in Paris. By doing so he simply avoids the issue of his notable success as a novelist. Celine, ignoring his protest of innocence, sees a sinister link between her recent job opportunity and his attempt to guilt her into moving to America. The fragility of their relationship is painfully evident in the fact that nearly every aspect of their lives has become potential ammunition in their battles. Jesse dismisses Celine's accusation as "horse shit."

Escalation. Celine wonders out loud if their daughters are the sole reason she and Jesse are still together as a couple: a suggestion echoing all the way back to Vienna and Jesse's revelation about why his parents were reluctant to get divorced. Then she goes even further, proposing that Jesse move to Chicago to be with Henry while she and the girls remain in Paris. There is an eerie calm surrounding this dangerous development. Celine sits down at a table, with her cup of tea, and leans back in her chair. Jesse remains seated on the couch. Their tone of voice and demeanor seem rational again. Yet they are discussing the possibility of ending their eighteen year old relationship.

Seated on opposite sides of the camera frame, they *look* like a long-married couple having a routine conversation. But the layers of mutual hostility between them, extending back over many years, run deep. Celine describes their Greek vacation as a one-sided affair very much in Jesse's favor. Adding a political dimension to her argument, she speaks of the dangerous potential for a Greek revolution in the aftermath of a worldwide economic crisis, and complains of Greeks who "act all happy" but "talk about how angry they are." Suddenly she no longer seems as

cosmopolitan as she once did. She may be exaggerating for effect, but unlike Celine, Jesse didn't have to take a leave of absence from his job in order to go on this vacation.

Jesse dismisses Celine's political concerns, insisting that, as usual when it comes to her big worries, nothing catastrophic will occur. So Celine shifts the battle lines from the political to the domestic front. Their vacation prevented her from attending to her job responsibilities and instead occupied her time with such unfulfilling tasks as wiping Jesse's and Henry's pee off toilet seats. Would the situation improve if Hank joined their family and placed even more demands on Celine's time? She is enormously frustrated at work, and her family burdens aggravate that frustration. Jesse insists his job too is demanding. Celine dismisses that claim as effortlessly as he discredited her political excuse, describing his life as nothing but an endless exchange of congratulations with other writers. True, fellow writer Patrick praised Jesse's third novel during their conversation on Patrick's veranda. But there were also hints of a sour critical reception for Jesse's third novel. And Stefanos, speaking for the general public, was not a fan of Jesse's third novel or his proposed fourth.

Celine concludes her diatribe by accusing Jesse of asking her to give up her "dream job" in order to move their family to Chicago. Jesse points out that only now, when she's trying to discredit his wish to spend more time with Hank, does she describe the government position she's been offered as her "dream job." Earlier, in the car on the way to Patrick's home, she wasn't even certain she wanted it. Celine defends her description, insisting that having doubts about a job doesn't diminish its importance to her. She rightfully demands Jesse's professional respect, but then once again exhibits disrespect for *his* profession, describing it as a series of frivolous, self-indulgent, contemplative walks that are trivial compared to the important

environmental work *she's* doing. To be taken seriously as a career woman and a mother is extremely important to Celine. If Jesse fails to give her that respect, she denies it to him.

According to Celine, Jesse is a self-contained unit. He takes care of himself while she takes care of everyone and everything else. He protests, claiming she never *lets* him take care of their daughters. She insists he would have botched the job. "So says *you*," Jesse retorts, getting off the couch and heading for the bathroom, trailed by Celine's sarcastic claim that she's "happy" he has so much time for ethereal, impractical pursuits while she has no time for anything but work and child care. He gives as good as he gets, emerging from the bathroom just long enough to remark, "Could you hold on a second. I just have to tune up the string section." Even if at heart they don't disrespect each other on a day-to-day basis, their present anger compels them to *express* contempt in the crudest manner, because they both know each other's emotional vulnerabilities so well.

Angry, Celine follows Jesse part way into the bathroom, where he takes a no doubt sloppy piss, to restate her point in stronger, bathroom-appropriate language. Laughing derisively, Jesse compliments Celine on her clever observation, adding his (false) intention to use it in a book someday. Again and again these wild-swinging lovers inflict wounds by attacking each other's professions and perceived weaknesses. Celine's comparative lack of literary skills is Jesse's target of convenience, as was her earlier reference to Medea as a Greek myth and her difficulty pronouncing the word "nurturer." These are petty yet hurtful insults. "That'll be the best line in the book" is Celine's way of challenging Jesse's writing skills. By making her feel incompetent, again, Jesse provoked a direct insult to the core of his own self-respect. And she compounds it by ordering him never to use anything she or the girls say or do in any of his future "fucking"

books. It's her declaration of divorce from Jesse's professional career, which got its start through their shared experiences in Vienna and Paris.

Returning from the bathroom while zipping up his pants (like digging in Celine's purse, one of the little informalities couples indulge in after years together), Jesse signs those divorce papers by pointing out that Celine was not in his last published novel, nor in the one he's writing now. It's his way of letting her know she's not that important to him anymore. As a final declaration of independence, he informs her he will write about "whatever the fuck I want."

"As always, our life works for *you*" Celine concedes bitterly as she sits back down at the table, playing the domestic martyr in their relationship. Jesse refuses to let her play that role, describing Celine's "perfect little narration of oppression" as a phony relic from the 1950's. *He* now lays claim to domestic servitude by pointing out the daily chores he does for their daughters while Celine is at work. And his arrow clearly hits its intended target. Celine quibbles ineffectually about the thirty minute difference between the time she really gets off work and the time he *says* she gets off work. Pressing his advantage, Jesse points out that they live in Paris, France—*her* home territory. "And you remind me of it every single day" she effectively jabs back. Is that part of the passive-aggressive behavior of which she accused him earlier? We can only guess at the accuracy of her charge against him.

Jesse persists with his assertion that he's built his life around Celine. In a voice dripping with sarcasm, he pretends to apologize for the hardship she's endured during their Greek vacation. Dropping the pretence, he tells her directly and angrily that he's only seen her "frolic in the sea and shove Greek salad down your throat." She turns that same food to her advantage by pointing out that she *made* the Greek salad "you eat like a pig." The wit they admired in each other so

long ago is now just a means to inflict emotional pain.

Apparently changing tactics, Jesse agrees with Celine that she does a great job taking care of their children, her friends and the world at large, but suggests she should do a better job taking care of herself. What does he mean by that? Is it a sincere compliment or a backhanded insult? If the former, Celine rejects it as “patronizing.” Then she jumps back moments in time to revive a previous topic, disputing once again his claim that she stays at work until 6:30 instead of 6:00. Why is that half hour distinction so important to her? Perhaps Jesse knows Celine has serious doubts about her skills and dedication as a mother, and so he deliberately, cruelly targets them. By *repeatedly* denying his one-time accusation, she telegraphs her vulnerability.

Celine rattles off a list of domestic chores she performs that Jesse does not. She quizzes him about the name of their children’s pediatrician. That strikes a nerve in him as sensitive as the 6:30 matter is for Celine, especially for a father who already feels like a failure to his son. “Stop quizzing me. It’s really fucking boring.” “Irritating” is probably a more accurate description. Obviously it’s not the first time she’s brought it up. Just like Jesse never letting Celine forget he sacrificed for her by living in Paris. *Nothing* is forgotten. Exaggerated and distorted, yes, but never forgotten. These are not the kind of repeated stories Celine referred to in Vienna when she insisted she would love a man more for knowing what he would say or do in a given situation.

Before Sunset ended with Celine performing the song “Just in Time,” which became her love song to Jesse. Their future together looked promising. Nearly a decade later the demands of career and home, combined with what she claims is Jesse’s lack of help with their daughters, leave Celine with no time to pursue her music. Jesse, on the other hand, is *all* about his literary pursuits. He defensively points out that his writing is not a hobby, implying that Celine’s music

is. For a woman who already suspects that no men take her or any other woman seriously, that distinction is galling. Jesse inflates his insult by remarking that Celine finds plenty of time to *complain* about her life, hinting that if she did less complaining she'd have more time for her "hobby."

"I love the way you sing. Okay?" Jesse tells Celine. As has happened before during this argument, it sounds like a straightforward compliment and a promising change of direction. But then he adds, "I fucked up my whole life because of the way you sing." For a man who once claimed to have written his first novel as a desperate attempt to reconnect with the woman who inspired it, his suggestion now that Celine lured him away from his wife and son with her siren song oozes hypocrisy. In *Before Sunset* he made it clear to Celine that his marriage to his now ex-wife had already turned into a nightmare. He was already searching for something better when he reunited with Celine in Paris. But now, nine years later, it's convenient for him to remember the reunion he desired as little more than a scheme by Celine to end his marriage.

Sharpening his attack, Jesse tells Celine, in so many words, she would be a musical genius if she had devoted to her art a fragment of the energy she wastes on "bitching, whining and worrying." The fact that he grossly exaggerates what he probably regards as her modest musical talent adds injury to insult. Celine's facial expression eloquently conveys her emotional reaction. Her eyes squint when he attacks her, open and soften when he seemingly compliments her singing, then flash with hostility when he pulls the rug out from under that praise. These characters play each other like musical instruments, knowing all the right keys to press to get the desired reaction.

Both characters have insulted each other's artistic endeavors. Without verbally replying to

Jesse's latest assault, Celine stands up from what should be the cozy little table they share, retrieves her purse from the couch and walks out of the hotel room. Jesse reminds her that she forgot to put on her shoes. In moments of great distraction, of whatever kind, we all tend to forget routine matters. Is Jesse taunting Celine? Or is he out of long habit doing her a simple, domestic favor, as when she reminded him where he kept the list of groceries they needed to purchase for dinner at Patrick's? No doubt they have done each other such favors thousands of times over the past nine years. Jesse's remark about Celine forgetting her shoes is at once grotesquely trivial, in the context of their vicious argument and potential break-up, and a sad reminder of the normal, satisfying routine they once enjoyed. Even in Vienna he carried her bags to a railroad station locker and she reminded him to get on the right bus for the airport.

Alone now, Jesse shakes his head in exasperation, stands up from the table and then collapses face down on the couch—exhausted. His dirty bare feet are almost a metaphor for his worn-out, disintegrating relationship with Celine. They've had so many conversations over the years that they've got nothing left to say that isn't destructive. Or so it seems for the moment.

But the battle is not over yet. Celine *must* get in the last word, as Jesse had to when he commented about her missing shoes. She returns to the room, slamming the door shut and angrily throwing down her keys and purse. But after a moment to cool down outside the room, what she offers now is not merely another barrage of insults, but an honest, passionate confession of her insecurities and frustrations as a mother. Burdens so great, she claims, that she even contemplated suicide over them. She cannot quite refrain from taking a couple jabs at Jesse during her forthright attempt at communication, describing his frequent book tours as "stupid" and Hank's custody battle as "shit," but she's at least *trying* to open a more reasonable dialog

with him. Jesse too cannot entirely avoid a regression to pettiness, correcting Celine's literary reference to Sylvia Plath committing suicide by putting her head in a "toaster." "Oven" he substitutes. The difference is irrelevant, as Celine reminds him.

Celine expands on her admission of maternal doubt while Jesse turns to face her. She confesses how clueless and incompetent she felt as a new mother. Empathizing with her, Jesse assesses his own performance as a father to Hank in similarly bleak terms. So they have something in common, which should bring them closer together. But Celine's insecurity has an additional component: her abiding fear that every man with whom she gets involved wants to dominate her, make her a "submissive housewife." Jesse soberly reassures her that no one could ever make that happen. As he does so he rises to a sitting position on the couch, signaling his more serious attitude. Celine sits down beside him. Their ever-shifting choreography of love and hate slides back towards the former. Their voices soften. Once more, reconciliation seems possible.

Celine gently expands on her feelings. Beneath her fiercely feminist exterior she feared she lacked the "instinct" to be a mother, despite loving her children dearly. Jesse's frequent absence from home exacerbated her self-loathing. Shame kept her from sharing her fears with him even when he phoned from far away. Jesse *now* assures Celine she did a great job raising their daughters. How differently they both sounded minutes ago, when every vulnerability was a legitimate target for attack. A new camera angle shows the couple seated side-by-side, hands pressed together, a bottle of wine (champagne?) and two glasses on the coffee table in front of them--a reminder of the glasses and wine they shared in Vienna. Think also of the couch they figuratively shared (Jesse sat on it while Celine performed a song and dance for him) at the end of *Before Sunset*, when their future looked so promising. This would be an appropriate moment

to conclude *Before Midnight* on a romantic note. Celine jokes about her pathetic attempts to get the girls to go to sleep one night, and her total lack of sex appeal during her maternal struggle. Jesse laughs sympathetically.

Popping the cork on the bottle and filling their glasses, Jesse tries to commiserate with Celine by citing the example of their daughters sharing fun on a trampoline, then fighting over a hula hoop one of them was using as a jump rope. He makes a general observation about humankind's perpetual state of dissatisfaction, regardless of how good we have it. Then he applies that conclusion to Celine and himself, arguing in a hotel room rented for them by their well-meaning friends.

Perhaps assuming that relations have improved sufficiently for them to have an open discussion, even a friendly debate, on a safely abstract topic, Celine counters that there is no *one* human state. And that if Jesse drew a pessimistic conclusion about life while watching their daughters fight in the midst of playing, he was probably already depressed about something else. Jesse reluctantly agrees, but clearly just to pacify Celine, who goes on to offer a contrary interpretation of sibling rivalry as a "beautiful" exhibition of "not letting anyone step on them or take away what they want. I like it when they fight. It gives me hope for them." Hope that they will never allow themselves to be turned into "submissive housewives" by domineering men?"

It's interesting how deeply seated some ideas are within these two characters. As early as Vienna, Jesse voiced the notion, possibly inspired by his parents' acrimonious marriage, that romantic relationships inevitably go sour. He even speculated that Celine would eventually grow tired of him if they became a long-term couple. Several times during that same evening Celine expressed her concern about male domination, and once commented, "There's a lot of good

things coming out of conflict:" including, apparently, conflict between her twin daughters.

At the same moment he hands Celine a glass of wine to share a hopeful toast with him, Jesse offhandedly (or is he retaliating for *her* comment about his chronic pessimism?) challenges her description of anger as a positive emotion. "You only end up hurting yourself, your work, the kids, me." Their fragile *détente* is not nearly strong enough to withstand such blunt criticism. Celine made a mistake by challenging Jesse's original point about human dissatisfaction so directly, reducing his philosophical observation to a psychological symptom. He, in return, committed an equal if not bigger blunder by suggesting that her passion for conflict has damaged everyone and everything that matters to her. They quickly slide back into bitter combat.

Celine icily challenges Jesse, "And you never get angry?" "When I do, I don't see it as a positive" he calmly defends himself, maintaining a passive-aggressive veneer of rationality when he clearly meant to criticize her. Though he probably doesn't realize that in Celine's mind he is attacking a woman's fundamental right to stand up for herself. Perhaps *he* was deeply hurt by her equally insensitive disregard for his observation about human nature. Pausing to consider how to deal with Jesse's latest gender insult, whether or not that's what he intended, Celine sets down her wine glass. Jesse knows that's a bad sign. The gloves are off again. The battle resumes. All that remains to be seen is how many rules of fair engagement have been tossed out the window.

Celine throws the first punch in this latest, unrestrained outbreak of hostilities, and it's definitely below the belt. Sex may be a clichéd topic for wounding a man's self-esteem, but it's still effective. Celine complains that, contrary to the false assumptions of his literary fans, Jesse makes love to her the same old boring way every time: lips, breasts, vagina, sleep. As he's done

before, Jesse plays into and makes fun of rather than denies her accusation. "I'm a man of simple pleasures." But is he too casual to be believable? Is he really hurt? Celine broadens her attack. "You're no Henry Miller on *any* level" simultaneously denigrates his lovemaking and his writing skills. We've already heard what she thinks of his incompetence as a father. What is there left to tear down?

Ignoring Jesse's restraining hand (does he want to attempt another reconciliation, or does he simply want her to stay put so he can return fire?), Celine leaves the couch and walks to the bedroom, lashing out verbally at the "creepy" hotel room she complimented when they first entered it, a million years ago, and at Ariadne and Stefanos for arranging a "sleazy" couple's massage for them.

Jesse tries to reunite with Celine in the doorway between bedroom and living room, but she refuses, so they merely switch locations. Referring to the massage, Jesse yells "You don't *have* to do it" from the bedroom, then lies down on the bed. They're engaged in an endless dance of recrimination, with each position and each location constantly being re-defined. In a softer tone of voice he adds, "I like hotel rooms. I think they're sexy." Is he contradicting Celine just to piss her off further, or is he actually trying to re-initiate a little romance with her at this unlikely moment in their hanging-by-a-thread relationship? If the latter, it blows up in his face.

Celine transforms Jesse's sexual invitation into an accusation of infidelity, claiming he had sex with another woman while he was away from home on a book promotion tour. "And I'm not jealous, because I'm not the jealous type. I just want to know." Of *course* she's the jealous type. So is Jesse, when he thinks he has reason to be (the alleged East European blow job). So are we *all*. But Jesse's reply is a non-denial denial. Protesting "I love you," he refuses to give Celine

ammunition to invalidate that love, which sounds to her and to us like a disguised admission of guilt.

Jesse tries to turn the harsh light of criticism back onto Celine, claiming he could supply a “laundry list of all the things about you that piss me off.” Flash back to a cable car ride in Vienna, where these two characters exchanged confessions about what pissed them off. On that occasion the first thing Jesse mentioned as a “problem” for him was “you, probably,” which was a sly admission of his budding romantic interest in her. *This* time, however, the context of the question is very different. Nine years of cumulative irritation and resentment stand ready to burst forth at the slightest opportunity.

“You’re fucking nuts” is Number One on Jesse’s list of complaints about Celine. He adds that she’ll never find another man willing to put up with her, then magnanimously points out that *he* accepts the whole package, “the crazy and the brilliant. I know you’re not going to change, and I don’t want you too.” He self-servingly casts himself in the role of tolerant, forgiving spouse, which begs Celine’s original question about whether or not he cheated on her--a question to which she stubbornly returns. And again he refuses to give a direct answer, rephrasing her question as though it had to do with his commitment to her, their daughters and the life they’ve built together. His answer to *that* question, which is the one he prefers to answer, is a resounding “Yes!” Celine, probably correctly, interprets his assertion as an admission of guilt to her original inquiry.

Desperate to even the score, Jesse accuses Celine of cheating on him with an ex-boyfriend, then once again claims to accept her “complicated” ways, which amounts to a lame justification of his own infidelity. He’s a “complicated” man. Recognizing Jesse’s bullshit for what it is, but

also betraying the fact that she *is* the jealous type, Celine puts on her shoes and silently exits the hotel suite, with more determination than the last time she did so. Jesse trails after her as far as the door, pleading his case in what are for him comfortably abstract terms. "I don't want to lead a boring life where two people own each other. Where two people are institutionalized in a box that others created." But as his voice rises to a shout, his abstract point becomes personal and highly emotional: "That is a bunch of stifling bullshit!"

After Celine shuts the door behind her, Jesse waves his hands as though dismissing the whole argument, and maybe their whole relationship. But then he sits down at the little dining table, crosses his legs and gazes expectantly at the closed door. Is he hoping Celine will return? After years of experience, does he *expect* her to return? He doesn't seem surprised when she does.

Celine returns all right, but only to dump the room key and announce in an ominously calm tone of voice, "I don't think I love you anymore." She departs again. No more arguing. Jesse says nothing. Does he concur? Background music—the same music we heard when Jesse returned to his car and family after parting from Hank at the airport—returns to the soundtrack. It's been gone for a long time. Jesse glances at Celine's abandoned cup of tea, then at the closed door through which she abruptly left. He sighs, re-directing his gaze to the half-filled wine glasses and the uncorked bottle on the coffee table. Do they trigger memories of their magical night in Vienna? The bottle sits on a tray next to a bowl of fruit. His and Celine's material circumstances have improved greatly since the night he couldn't afford a hotel room or that bottle of wine. Unfortunately everything else has fallen apart. Walking a half-circle around the room, Jesse looks at the rumpled bed on which they started to make love not so long ago. Now it seems like a distant memory.

Jesse's silent survey of the Celine-deserted hotel room is reminiscent of our re-visitation, at the end of *Before Sunrise*, of some of the Vienna locations where Jesse and Celine got acquainted. The emptiness we felt then was due to our realization of how lifeless and meaningless such picturesque settings are without human interaction to give them emotional substance. We weren't certain if Celine and Jesse's great night together was just a passing thing, doomed to fade into a wistful memory and maybe forgotten altogether (unless you're Mr. Bernstein, recollecting an even briefer encounter with a woman dressed in white, in *Citizen Kane*), or something they would build on when they reunited. After a nine year delay, they *did* reunite, and made something solid from those memories. But now the entire edifice seems to have crumbled back into lifeless ruins. Two subsequent shots of Jesse, a long shot followed by a close-up, show him brooding on that sad development. He and Celine have become the bitter, argumentative middle-aged couple who inadvertently brought them together in the first place.

Music leads the way, alerting us to a plan hatching in Jesse's mind before we discover what it is. Just as he returned to the dining car to persuade Celine to join him on a one-night walking tour of Vienna, then six months later returned to Vienna to reunite with her, then years later wrote a fictional version of their brief encounter in hopes of attracting her attention, Jesse now takes action to heal their badly damaged relationship. The music becomes dance-like, in tandem with his creative effort, accompanying him outside the hotel and to the pier where he and Celine earlier watched the sun set: a sunset that, in retrospect, seems to have predicted the end of their life together.

As important as Jesse's pursuit of Celine after their big blow-up is the fact that she's there on the pier, sitting at a table, ostensibly waiting for him. Not willing to *admit* she's waiting for him,

at least she's not on her way to Patrick's house to pick up the children and return to Paris without him.

The setting is romantic. A Greek pier with café tables, water sparkling in the background and lights from dwellings on the other side of the river. I'm reminded of the café boat on the Danube these two characters visited on their first night, and the tourist boat on the Seine nine years later. From a distance we see Celine's table surrounded by others like it. But each of them is occupied by more than one person. Initially Celine is bracketed by a young couple seated at a table directly between her and the camera, visually emphasizing her solitary status. Another young couple vacates the table to her left. She watches them depart, perhaps remembering her time with Jesse when she and Jesse too were young and romantic.

We approach Celine via a subjective camera. Jesse enters the film frame. The camera was, briefly, subjective from his point of view. Celine spots him and looks away. This won't be easy. Earlier in the film she asked him if he would still try to persuade her to get off the train with him if he had met her as she is now—a middle-aged woman. He fumbled his answer. Now, in a last ditch effort to save their crumbling life together, he enacts a variation on that scenario.

"Miss?" he inquires as he nears her table, pretending to be a stranger. He's trying to start their acquaintance all over again, which is pretty much what she asked him to do as they walked through the ruins. "I don't want to talk right now" is her discouraging reply. He persists with a fiction he hopes will help heal their rift. "Are you by yourself? Are you waiting for somebody?" Annoyed, Celine snaps back that she's alone and happy to be so. "I'm an angry person and I hurt myself, my kids and everyone I loved." Throwing Jesse's hurtful words back in his face, she's not yet inclined to forgive him and participate in his new, alternate scenario. Yet her bitter reply

is better than no reply at all; or worse, her immediate departure.

“Just my type” responds Jesse, transforming Celine’s discouraging note into something positive as he borrows a chair from a nearby table and sits down next to her. Slightly less hostile than before, she informs him she’s not in the mood and wishes to be alone. He refuses to give up, sticking to his fictional role as a stranger who noticed her from a distance and was magnetically drawn by her incomparable beauty. It’s a hopelessly banal pick-up line. But he’s trying, belatedly, to answer her old question about whether or not he would still find her physically attractive if they met now for the first time.

Celine could easily stand up and walk away at this point, leaving behind Jesse and his play-acting forever. Instead she thanks him for his silly compliment, though her facial expression and tone of voice ooze contempt. He presses on, asking if he can buy her a drink and get to know her better. “Are you here on business?” She does not bother to reply. Years ago, under happier circumstances, they conspired more than once to create a fictional scenario: once when confronting two young Viennese men on a bridge outside a train station, a second time in a restaurant where they pretended to be each other’s best friends so they could more freely express their opinions of and feelings for each other, and again in Paris when they postulated the end of the world and discussed how they would spend their last few hours together. This time Celine will require much more coaxing to participate in a similar effort.

Jesse improvises, accounting for Celine’s lack of response by speculating that she has a boyfriend. “Not anymore” she answers, referring to Jesse rather than a fictional third party, and in effect reiterating the last sentiment (“I don’t think I love you anymore”) she expressed to him in the hotel room. Nevertheless, it supplies Jesse with an opening for further dialog. Having no

rival to contend with, he is free to pursue their hypothetically new acquaintance. Equally promising, Celine takes a sip from the wine glass on the table in front of her. Is it her acceptance of the drink he just offered to buy for her in their fictional first encounter? Or even her belated acceptance of the glass of wine he poured for her and she turned down in the hotel room?

Jesse inquires if Celine wants to discuss her recent break-up, which he chooses to pretend did not refer to him. We could be back in Vienna where the two of them, over a game of pinball, discussed their then recent romantic disasters. Consciously or not, they're playing out a variation on a scene from their shared past. But this time the mood between them is different. "I don't talk to strangers" declares Celine, seeming to close the door on further conversation.

Jesse cleverly sidesteps Celine's roadblock by appealing directly to their shared past—in effect, his new scenario. He claims they met before, in the summer of 1994. She stubbornly insists he's mistaken her for someone else. Jesse plows ahead, insisting they fell in love all those years ago. Celine yields a bit on that point, but then uses it to insult him. She "vaguely" recollects a man who was "sweet and romantic," made her feel less alone and had "respect" for who she was as a person. She scolds Jesse by comparing the man he is now to the man he insists fell in love with her all those years ago.

"That's me. I'm the guy" Jesse declares cheerily, trying to convince her that Vienna Jesse is, despite recent evidence to the contrary, alive and well in Greese Jesse. She remains skeptical. They've stalled again, with the possibility of total failure staring them in the face. So Jesse gets even more creative, in his literary way, veering into the science fiction genre in order to keep his scenario alive. Claiming he's a time traveler, he insists he has already lived through *this* night and therefore knows something important about it that she doesn't. While making this assertion

he picks up and carefully folds a napkin from their table. Is he nervous, as when he fiddled with salt and pepper shakers in the lounge car of the train to Vienna? The stakes are incredibly high this time

Celine is not enamored with Jesse's new plot. If she were one of his readers, she'd be on the verge of abandoning his new novel before finishing it. Jesse's demeanor turns more serious. "I've come to save you from . . . being blinded by all the little bullshit of life." "It's not bullshit" she counters, thinking he's trivializing their problems. So Jesse jumps back to an earlier moment in their conversation, dropping the sci-fi element for the time being and assuring her that he *is* that "sweet and romantic" guy she met years ago. This time she plays along, but not so subtly reminds him he's not the man he used to be. "You look like shit." Presumably she's describing his attitude and behavior as well.

"You, on the other hand, are even more beautiful than I remember," Jesse counters. "Bullshit," Celine replies, borrowing a word he employed earlier and using it against him. In one sense she's right. Physically and emotionally she is not the same woman he encountered in Vienna. The memory of what they were remains alive in them, but the years since Vienna have made them less tolerant of and enchanted with each other. And to the great credit of *Before Sunrise*, even their romantic night in Vienna revealed the potential for discord, boredom and disenchantment between them, despite powerful feelings of mutual attraction and the excitement of discovering new things about each other. As Jesse pointed out on their first night together, familiarity breeds a certain amount of contempt. But any long-lasting relationship consists of present and past. Can these two characters re-ignite the best of what they brought out in each other in Vienna and Paris? Does that capacity still live within them? Or is it *only* a memory now?

Celine slams the door on Jesse's fiction. "This is not a game." She fears he's just trying to manipulate her for sex or to get her to move to Chicago. It's the same fear of being dominated by men that she's long held. And yet Jesse won't give up, inventing new details to rejuvenate his crumbling story. He claims to be a messenger from the future, bringing Celine a note from her eighty-two year old self. And she is intrigued just enough to play along. The author has momentarily succeeded in hooking his audience. Celine expresses surprise that she's still alive at that age. Former thoughts of suicide perhaps make Jesse's new scenario a happy prospect for her. And he is quick to capitalize on it, telling her she's not only alive at eighty-two but still feisty. "How's my French ass?" she inquires. "Nice. Really nice" he flatters. Reluctantly cooperative one moment and uncooperative the next, she dismisses his compliment, claiming not to care about her physical appearance. Then why ask him about it in the first place? Obviously she *does* care, as do most of us about our fading looks as we get older. Jesse elaborates, more realistically this time. "Let's just say there's more of you to love." So they've reached the point again where they can joke about each other's flaws and foibles. A short time ago, in the hotel room, that would have been impossible. Jesse's comment would have been perceived as an insult and answered in kind.

The napkin Jesse folded now becomes a letter from old Celine to middle-aged Celine. Offering her the option not to hear him read the letter, Jesse gives her an opportunity to call an abrupt halt to his make-believe script. She opts to hear it, keeping their fiction alive. From a camera position behind Jesse we can see there is nothing written on the napkin he unfolds. He's improvising. Despite objections to his flowery style, Celine allows him to continue reading. Speaking through the character of old Celine, just as in Vienna he spoke through the character of her best friend

back in Paris, Jesse confesses his inability to connect with even the people he loves most, and apologizes to Celine for that deep-seated flaw. "But you are his only hope" he adds, appealing for clemency.

Jesse employs the fiction of old Celine to assure middle-aged Celine that she's entering the best years of her life. Recalling an incident in her life of Celine when she was twelve (once again we discover these characters know more about each other than we do about either), Jesse brings a slight smile to her face. The first we've seen in a long time. He *does* remember some things that are important to her. And he follows up with assurances that Ella and Nina will grow up to become feminist icons. "Nice one" Celine concedes, knowing he's placating her.

But before descending any further into shameless attempts at flattery once removed, Jesse requests permission to skip to the letter's postscript. Celine, not terribly impressed by his gushing praise, agrees. Even if she *were* impressed, she would be reluctant to show it and thereby yield a tactical advantage to him. Jesse slides his chair closer to hers, a move he would not have dared to make at the beginning of this scene.

The postscript describes an evening of incredible sex middle-aged Celine will enjoy in, of all places, Greece. It's a dangerous maneuver by Jesse, who risks reducing his entire reconciliation plot to something trivial and selfish. He's counting on Celine to remain in a joking mood with him. Disgusted by what appears now to be a mere ploy for sex, Celine asks Jesse to stop his "stupid games." "We're not in one of your stories, okay. Did you hear what I said to you back in the room? Did you *hear* me?" She drags him back to reality of here and now.

Exasperated, Jesse acknowledges he heard her. And part of what he heard was that she doesn't love him anymore. By demanding that her remarks be taken seriously, Celine is forced to admit

her own cruel mistake—if it *was* a mistake. If splitting up is what she really wants, Jesse is ready to give up the fight. He bitterly compares her to “little girls” who prefer to live inside a fairy tale. Angry now, he complains of putting up with *her* “bullshit” and claims he’s only trying to make things better by complimenting her ass and encouraging her to laugh. Discarding his make-believe letter, he warns her there’s a limit to how many times he’ll keep coming back to her after episodes like this. How many have there been over the past nine years?

Celine’s facial expression vacillates between stubborn resentment and tearful yearning. Jesse awaits her reply. She hesitates. He sighs in frustration. They look away from each other, as they did while listening to a romantic song in the listening booth of a Viennese record store. They repeat their head and eye movements from that earlier scene, but no longer out of shyness. They’re on the verge of a final break-up, not a new romance.

It’s Celine’s turn to make some gesture that will allow their dialog to continue. If she doesn’t, their eighteen-year conversational odyssey ends with a whimper, not a bang. Implicitly agreeing with Jesse’s ultimatum about unconditional love, she turns to him and asks, “So what about this time machine?” By re-entering his fantasy world, she signals her willingness to work on their severely damaged relationship. Tentatively, they each add to the scenario. Sex is the metaphor they choose, Celine giving her consent to the postscript he offered earlier. Apparently time travel doesn’t work unless you’re naked.

Celine adopts her “bimbo” persona from way back at the dinner they shared with friends, pretending to be both ignorant about and impressed by Jesse’s talk of the space-time continuum. It’s a curious move on her part. Is she unconsciously returning to an earlier point of contention between them, mocking what she still believes is his and every other man’s preference for dumb

women who will worship and be subservient to them? If so, it does not bode well for their future together. Or, on the other hand, is Celine consciously making fun of that earlier conflict and thereby rising above it? Jesse laughs and plays along, tentatively suggesting that tonight might be the night of groundbreaking sex to which Celine's older self referred. Dropping her bimbo act, Celine concurs. "Well, it must have been one helluva night we're about to have." The intermixing of past, present and future perspectives sounds like something from Jesse's proposed fourth novel.

Or so we hope as we and the camera slowly take leave of Celine and Jesse, surrounding them once again with café tables occupied by people as oblivious of them as they are of the strangers. Though undeniably middle-aged and frayed around the edges, they still make an attractive couple as we disengage from their lives, for now. Forever? Stay tuned. It's been a rough journey this time—a brutally complicated tango with precious little romance to compensate for the hostility. But the spirit of Vienna 1994 is not extinguished. Like George and Martha after *their* symphony of recrimination, Jesse and Celine survive Walpurgisnacht to love and battle another day. "Skating away on the thin ice of the new day," as the band Jethro Tull memorably phrased it. Like the ending of *Before Sunrise*, *Before Midnight* leaves it up to the audience, each according to his or her inclinations, to decide the future course of their journey.

Boyhood, Richard Linklater's 2014 film, has nothing directly to do with *Before Sunrise* and its two sequels. But as the extended coming of age story of a child of divorced parents, it fleshes out the lives of Jesse and Hank Wallace, who are also children of divorce. In one sense the tale of Mason is a prequel to *Before Sunrise*, giving us a glimpse of Jesse's childhood, and a sequel to

Before Midnight, doing the same for Hank's. And in its portrait of Mason's mother, *Boyhood* also contributes to our understanding of Celine, whose nurturing of Ella and Nina went largely unseen by us and often occurred in Jesse's absence, and of Jesse's ex-wife, who presumably raised Hank by herself. In stylistic terms, *Boyhood* is a first cousin to the three *Before* movies. Filmed over the course of roughly a decade, using the same actors, it accomplishes in a single story what *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight* accomplish in three stories stretching over eighteen years.

Like Hank and Jesse, Mason is the son of parents who divorced when he was very young. We follow him as he experiences things experienced by nearly every child: battling with his sibling, being bullied at school, getting and losing girlfriends, taking criticism from teachers and employers, etc. But coming from a broken home, he endures extra challenges, like secretly overhearing his overworked mother, in a rare moment of emotional weakness, complain to her selfish boyfriend, "I would *love* to have some time to myself!" "I was a daughter. Then I was somebody's fucking mother!" Perhaps Hank heard similar outbursts of frustration from his mother. Jesse certainly heard some discouraging things from his mother as a result of her quarrels with his father.

When Mason's mom moves her family to Houston so she can pursue a college degree and build a better life for herself and her children, Mason has to leave behind his best friend. When she flees her abusive second husband, Mason doesn't even get to say goodbye to his stepfather's son, who had become his new best friend. And for the most part, unlike his more outspoken sister, he keeps his feelings to himself, which echoes Hank's behavior with Jesse at the airport, in *Before Midnight*.

The fathers of both Hank and Mason are portrayed by Ethan Hawke, whose character returns to Mason's life after being absent for a year and a half. Like Jesse, Mason's father does the best he can to make up for being a part-time Dad: taking his kids bowling and to a baseball game, sharing his music with them, involving them in presidential politics, dispensing fatherly advice on various subjects, trying to be both tolerant and protective while leaving the primary burden of raising them to their mother. One of the film's most touching scenes is a father/son camping trip, a rare occasion when Mason opens up to his father and really seems to enjoy himself without being self-conscious about it. In *Before Midnight* Jesse advises Hank to stay in soccer rather than quit. Sports builds character, he implies. Bowling with Mason, Hawke's character refuses to let his son use side bumpers that prevent gutter balls, telling Mason he doesn't need those childish crutches any more. Like Mason, Hank is more artistic than athletic. One becomes a photographer, the other plays piano.

For the most part the relationship between father and son is good. But while in high school Mason learns that his dad sold the cool black Camaro he once promised would be Mason's when the boy turned sixteen. The father had forgotten all about that promise. He dismisses Mason's disappointment as silly and deflects any guilt he might be feeling by asserting his rights of ownership. Nevertheless, it is a big disappointment to Mason: another of many broken connections in his life. Yet he perseveres, often withdrawn and barely communicative, but seldom vindictive. If he rebels, he does so quietly, declaring his independence in small ways.

Like Jesse, Mason's father remarries and starts another family. Both boys spend time with those secondary families. But whereas Hank builds an affectionate and trusting relationship with Celine, more so in some ways than he has with Jesse, Mason is never that close to his dad's

second wife or her very religious, conservative parents. He tolerates them for the sake of family peace. By contrast, during the course of *Before Midnight* Hank confides more in Celine than in Jesse.

There are strong hints of an acrimonious relationship between Mason's parents, to which both kids are exposed. Perhaps it's not as bitter or long-lasting as the feud between Jesse and his ex-wife, but it's roughly analogous. At one point in *Boyhood* an acquaintance recklessly reveals to Mason that he was conceived during break-up sex between his parents. Jesse too was not committed to his girlfriend when he got her pregnant, as he reveals to Celine in *Before Sunset*. Hank lets slip at the airport that his mother hates another man even more than she hates Jesse. Did she re-marry and subsequently divorce again? Mason's mother re-marries twice more after her first divorce. Her second and third husbands, despite different personalities and backgrounds, both prove to be alcoholics. One of them physically abuses Mason's mother, who resolutely shields her children from him.

In the character of Mason's mom, *Boyhood* gives voice to Hank's mother, who is neither seen nor heard from, and about whom we hear only bad things from Jesse and Celine. If she is truly the hateful alcoholic Celine describes, she is clearly not as strong or resourceful as Mason's mom, who sacrifices much to do right by her children. Through the performance of Patricia Arquette we get a deeply sympathetic look at the challenges of being a single mother. Her portrait may also fill a gap in our understanding of Celine's early years as a new and anxious mother during Jesse's long absences on book promotion tours.

All children feel controlled by their elders, and eventually, if they grow up at all, desire independence. Both Jesse and Celine briefly discussed their attempts to break free of their

parents' benevolent but oppressive control. Mason has two well-meaning and reasonably tolerant parents. He and his sister could certainly have done worse. The struggle between nurturing and independence is seldom easy. Near the end of *Boyhood* the mother announces she's selling the family home and moving to a smaller apartment. As part of that downsizing effort, she informs her college-dwelling daughter and college-bound son they must sell, donate or take away all of their belongings. They protest. But when the moment arrives for Mason to leave home for college, he's quite comfortable about it, not even bothering to pack the first photograph he ever took, lovingly framed by his now tearfully nostalgic mother. Like Hank, and perhaps like Jesse too, he's developed a protective shell around his emotions.

Driving down the highway by himself, in his dented (bruised, like his character) pick-up, Mason contentedly heads for college. Not resentful of his parents, but no longer emotionally dependent on them either. Accompanied on the soundtrack by the song "Hero," performed by Family of the Year, he sets out to find and define his own life, presumably the way Jesse did before *Before Sunrise* and hopefully the way Hank will do after *Before Midnight*. His is the (tentatively) happy ending we wish for any child—especially one who has to do a little extra to successfully navigate the difficult journey to adulthood. "Let me go. I don't want to be your hero," "I don't want to be a part of your parade." Those song lyrics and others like it speak for the taciturn Mason. Hank is there with him, in spirit. So is Jesse. Even Celine, of whose childhood we got fleeting glimpses during her conversations with Jesse over the years, battled for her independence in some measure. Ella and Nina will have to navigate the same journey, just as Celine and Jesse, like Mason's mother, will have to figure out what to do with the rest of their lives after the children leave the nest.

Speaking of her parents' attempts to shape her future, Celine once complained, "It was this constant conversion of my fanciful ambitions into practical, money-making ventures." Jesse concurred: "I was dead set on listening to what everyone else thought I should be doing with my life and then doing the opposite." Mason doesn't say it in so many words. But in his own quiet way, he acts on the same impulse. Stopping for gas on the way to college, he pulls out his camera and takes a few pictures of his surroundings. He's not thinking about mom, dad, sister or home. And when he reaches his destination, he finds three like-minded soul-mates: his dorm roommate, the roommate's girlfriend and one of their friends. They share in his joy of independence and discovery. The boy who could so easily have withdrawn permanently into a shell, protecting himself from being disappointed by everyone and everything the world has to offer, makes a connection. Sharing tentative but meaningful conversation with a new acquaintance named Nicole, he overcomes the disastrous consequences of his previous romantic experience and ventures forth again. Their dialog sounds much like Jesse and Celine's in *Before Sunrise*.

Before Nicole it was Sheena. Though they ended badly, Sheena and Mason shared stimulating conversation while walking around Austin, Texas, which became for them what Vienna was to Celine and Jesse. Hank, several years younger than is Mason at the end of *Boyhood*, has his first meaningful romantic relationship while on vacation in Greece. Mason and Nicole share an abbreviated version of the shy exchange of glances between Jesse and Celine in the listening booth of that old record shop in Vienna. Is it a coincidence that Mason's mustache and goatee resemble Jesse's in *Before Sunrise*?

Maybe Julie Delpy, Ethan Hawke and Richard Linklater will be around long enough to capture on film what it could be like to live, love, hate, reminisce and regret in one's fifties, sixties,

seventies and eighties. It's been a great ride so far.